

The Greatest
Demon
Lord
IS
REBORN
ASA
TYPICAL
NOBODY

Former Typical
Nobody

6

Myojin Katou

Illustration by
Sao Mizuno



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Ard

Ex-Demon Lord. Has come to terms with his own powers since the Megatholium incident. Currently visiting home.

"I imagine you will all see how much she's improved tonight."

"I'm the best cook at the Academy now!"

Carla

Ard's mother and one of the legendary Great Mages. A gentle soul who greets everyone with a smile.

Jack

Ard's father and one of the legendary Great Mages. Has the biggest heart and is a man among men.

"Mmm! Tastes like Ireena wasn't even involved in making this!"

"Heh. Seems like sending you to the Academy was the right decision after all."

Weiss

Ireena's father. A beautiful and righteous man of virtue. Known as the living legend, the Heroic Baron.

"I-incredible...! I guess humans do have unlimited potential...!"





"I don't
want
to be
another
face
in the
crowd.
I want
to be
special
to you,
Ard."

Ireena

An elven girl with a strong sense of justice. Seems to have something to say about Ard's new attitude...

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The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 6

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 6 MOTO MURABITO A

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CHAPTER 71

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Friend in Crisis

“Nice! Leave it to you, Ard, to catch that huge boar with your bare hands!”

“Ha-ha. Look at yourself, Ireena, carrying such a bounty of unusual mushrooms. It seems Lady Luck smiles upon you.”

On a mountain path that saw heavy foot traffic, I walked with Ireena, shouldering my prey, as the dappled sunlight poured down on us.

Summer vacation was upon the students of the Laville National Academy of Magic. A solid twenty days, so Ireena and I had decided to return to the village where we were born and raised. I was long overdue for a bit of R&R as a typical nobody.

“It’s been quite some time since we spent some time alone, Ireena.”

Summer break looked the same for all students—from nobility to commoners. They were all homebound. Our friend Ginny was no exception.

With no place to call home, Sylphy had set off on a journey, saying that she had “a bad feeling about this” and that she was “gonna use this time to level up!”

Hence, why Ireena and I were spending some moments by ourselves, which didn’t happen often...

“You know, it’s a bit sad, not seeing the faces we see every day.”

“Yeah... To be honest, I’ve been a little down, but...” Ireena said.

“But?”

“If you’re with me, Ard, it has nothing on me!”

I’d like to announce that our Ireena had as brilliant a smile as ever.

As we carried on our conversation, we arrived back at the village.

“Oh! Welcome home, Ard!”

“Glad to have you back, Ireena!”

“Looks like you got a bit burnt. You take care of that, you hear?”

A trail of villagers wishing warm welcomes followed us all the way back. There’s truly nowhere like home.

We returned to the Meteor house.

“You’re back!” bellowed my father.

“Oh my. And you’ve brought another big catch with you.”

“Heh-heh. It seems the mountains have bestowed their blessings on us.”

My parents—Jack and Carla—and Ireena’s father, Weiss, ushered us in. We were all going to stay here for the night.

Our parents were friends, and the Olhydes had made frequent visits to our home since Ireena and I were kids, so we were basically like siblings.

“Tonight,” I announced, “we’ll be preparing an exquisite course of boar and mushrooms, dressed up in a medley of herbs. I ask for your patience while I put together the dish.”

“I’ll help you!” Ireena volunteered.

“What?” Jack said. “Ireena, stay here and, um, chat with us!”

“T-that sounds great. Why not leave the cooking to Ard?” Carla asked.

“Tell your old man how school is going,” Weiss coaxed.

Sweat beaded on their foreheads, seeing that they were intimately familiar with Ireena’s skills in the kitchen. Her cheeks puffed up at the sight.

“Hey! I’ll have you know that I’ve gotten better!”

“Ireena’s right. Do not fret. I imagine you will all see how much she’s improved tonight.”

We got to work and butchered the boar.

The dining table was soon lined with a whole course of dishes—from a simple steak to a refreshing cold stew.

“Dig in.”

They gingerly exchanged looks before venturing to take a timid bite.

“Mmm!” Jack said. “Tastes like Ireena wasn’t even involved in making this!”

“I-incredible...! I guess humans *do* have unlimited potential...!”

“I hate to doubt my own daughter, but...did you really help make this, Ireena? To think you could assist in the kitchen... I’m floored by this change in you.”

Showered with praise, Ireena straightened up and snorted.

“The sorry cook I’ve been is long gone! In fact, I’m the best cook at the Academy now!”

She wasn’t wrong. As proof, she had gone up against a boy who came from a family of world-famous chefs and beat him in an on-campus cooking

throw down.

...So much had happened at that school. I looked back on all these memories fondly.

“Heh,” Weiss laughed. “Seems like sending you to the Academy was the right decision after all.”

“Even Ard has some common sense now!” Carla commented.

“And it seems like you’ve even made some mates,” noted my father. “You look happier, unlike your kid days.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “The Academy is full of great people.”

We could talk forever about what was happening at school.

Weiss looked like he remembered something. “By the way, how is Lady Olivia?” he asked. “Ever the one to run about, isn’t she?”

“Yes. After all, she’s now essentially head of state after everything that went down recently. She said she would be spending the entire summer traveling from nation to nation.”

“Damn,” Jack said. “Sounds rough.”

“Yeeeah. Seems the entire continent has been dealing with a lot,” commented my mother.

“I do hope no storms will pass our way.”

It all started within the holy nation of Megatholium and spiraled the entire continent into a cold war.

On one side was our nation—the Laville Empire of Sorcery—and its allies. On the other side were the states, Megatholium included, that had come together to form the Anti-Laville Alliance. We were sizing each other up, seconds away from pouncing at each other’s throats.

“With Lady Olivia hard at work, I don’t imagine we’ll engage in a full-blown war. There may be a few skirmishes, but they’ll be like little ripples in a river. Soon enough, it will be as if nothing ever happened.”

With time, this tension would dispel. And if it didn’t, I would *make* it disappear.

The doorbell rang through the house, I steeled myself...

“...A guest, it seems.”

Who could it be? Did our neighbor Medius decide to mooch a free meal?

I swiftly stood and headed to the entrance to greet the newcomer. Ireena followed behind me as if that was her role.

As soon as I opened the door, we looked alarmed.

“You’re...”

I can’t say I expected this visitor.

Standing at the door was a girl. Lovely like Ireena, but without the oomph. We had met this girl—beautiful in a plain way—back in Megatholium...

One of the Queen’s Shadows, our nation’s secret organization of specialized forces.

“Umm, I’m sorry... What was your name?”

“...Kalmia,” said the girl, expressionless and monotone.

“And what might I help you with today?”

She must have come all this way for a good reason. I mentally prepared myself.

When we heard the response from those tiny lips...Ireena and I looked at her with wide-eyed shock.

“The Asylas Federation has declared war on us. They invaded the lands ruled by the Salvan and Spencer families the other day.”

CHAPTER 72

The Ex-Demon Lord, Interrupted

Five major powers ruled this continent.

The Laville Empire of Sorcery, our home.

The Republic of Goldenia, dwelling of dwarves.

The Federal States of Saphiria, melting pot of many species.

The Vyheim Empire, a place where elves enjoyed special rights.

And...the Asylas Federation, state of savages.

These five powers had played a large part in the mess in Megatholium that had roped in me and Ireena. To fight back against Lars al Ghoul, a demon-run crime organization that was growing stronger by the day, Megatholium had been trying to mediate and bring the nations together by gathering their leaders...but the five-way alliance fell apart.

Everything had been orchestrated by Lizer Bellphoenix, the leader of Megatholium and head of the world's biggest religion, the United Creed. As it turned out, this scheme—formulated by the greatest officer in my old army and one of the Four Heavenly Kings—was a perfect opportunity for some self-reflection. The problem was, it also made Laville the most despised nation on the continent.

Things seemed to calm down when Olivia threw herself directly in the line of fire, so I figured we were safe from a major shake-up. Apparently, however, I hadn't taken the madness of Asylas's King Dread seriously enough.

"Raising an army at a time like this? What could they be thinking?" I wondered aloud, frowning in the doorway.

"...I agree. It seems like tyranny to me." Kalmia must have had some thoughts about this, as a hint of disgust had surfaced on her masklike face.

Ireena seemed to feel that same way. "How could they deploy their troops now...?! If things go south, we'll end up with a five-way war on our hands...!"

Laville and Anti-Laville forces were staring each other down. The situation was like a balloon about to burst at any moment. The one thing holding it all together was political motive. As it stood now, Saphiria was the only nation that supported us. That automatically put Goldenia, who were anti-Laville in name only, in a tough position. After all, the two nations had a close trading relationship, but it was more like a master-servant kind of deal.

No other nation had any need for exports from the Republic of Goldenia. The Federal States of Saphiria, on the other hand, had a booming industry centered on food, and their water was in high demand year-round. Meanwhile, Goldenia was dotted with deserts, and their water supply was constantly low. For Goldenia, water from Saphiria was more crucial than life itself. No other country had water resources that afforded them enough of it to export.

If some nation picked a fight with Laville, Saphiria would naturally join the Empire in a united front. I could see Saphiria threatening Goldenia to team up with us, leveraging their water resources, but who could say what Goldenia would do in response? Either way...there was no question that political egos and obligations would intensify the madness once the battle began.

That was why those against Laville had, thus far, done no more than weakly protest. The Asylas Federation, however, apparently had trouble picking up on that vibe, and had decided to wage war. I imagined the other leaders of the Five Powers were losing their damn minds.

“...And what would Her Majesty have us do?”

“First, you will go to the territories ruled by the Salvans and the Spencers. Then—”

“—We’ll go save Ginny and the others!” Ireena said.

Kalmia nodded.

The Salvans were Ginny’s family. The Spencers were Elrado’s. The two houses had maintained a master-servant relationship for generations and had protected their swath of land since the founding of Laville. The town under attack was positioned along the border, and I’d heard it was awash in a sea of blood.

I imagined Ginny and Elrado, as the eldest of their noble families, would be preparing to head into battle themselves, even though they weren’t adults yet. In times of crisis, it wasn’t unheard of for such offspring to be entrusted

with the entire army.

“Ginny will be perfectly fine. It’s Elrado we should be concerned about.”

When we’d traveled to the past at the hands of a mysterious young man, I had created and armed Ireena and Ginny with magic equipment. Since they could summon these protections at will, there was no danger of the enemy seizing them. As long as nothing crazy happened and her armor and weapons remained in good condition, I imagined Ginny would be just fine.

Elrado, on the other hand, was a wild card.

“...Though we had our differences when we started school at the Academy,” I said, “I believe we’re almost friends. I refuse to let him die.”

Elrado was among my classmates who came rushing to my aid during the incident in Megatholium. I didn’t want him to die.

“I understand the mission. We’ll make haste to our destination. I apologize for the trouble, Kalmia, but I ask that you fill in our parents.”

“Understood.”

There was no time to inform them. In fact, we would forgo standard modes of transportation...like carriages.

“We have to teleport. Are you ready, Ireena?”

“You betcha!” She nodded in my direction.

I prepared the spell that would bring us to our destination. It only worked on places that a caster previously visited, but I’d been all over the country since entering the Academy, since I was always finding myself in some trouble. I’d even visited this border town on a prior occasion.

Obviously, we would be able to teleport there. There was no way the spell wouldn’t work.

After I cast the magic and our consciousness became hazy...Ireena and I opened our eyes in an unfamiliar place.

“Umm... Do you think the enemy’s assault turned the town into a *forest*?” Ireena asked, glancing around and blinking in confusion.

A forest. We were standing in the middle of overgrown foliage.

“...No, Ireena. We’re most certainly in a forest. It was never a town.”

“Oh, b-but that means...”

“Yes. The teleportation spell has failed, it would seem.”

“N-no way! B-but you never mess up!” Ireena looked at me in disbelief.

I shook my head. “I made no such mistake. We’ve fallen right into the enemy’s hands.”

“The enemy’s hands?”

“Yes. They must have anticipated we would teleport and tampered with the spell so we would be sent to this forest.”

An obstruction of sorts. Such techniques were popular back in the olden days when teleportation magic was used for just about everything...but very few people in the modern era could pull it off. I imagined it had to be the scheme of *that man*.

“Ireena. Do not let your guard down,” I warned. “I imagine this is a plot far beyond anything we could have expected. Nothing is off limits from here on out. Think of it as uncharted territory. Remain alert.”

“R-right,” Ireena replied, nodding.

I returned an affirmative nod of my own. “For now, we must do something about whatever is hindering us from saving Ginny and Elrado.” I looked around at the trees. It was night, so I could hardly see anything, though I could hear birds, bugs, and beasts.

It didn’t take long for me to detect a trace of the enemy’s spell around us.

“...As I thought. The ones getting in our way aren’t some nobodies.”

It was more than just a simple magic circle constructed in a forest. The plant and animal life had been incorporated into the spell. I only knew one person who could pull off something so complex.

The former Heavenly King, Lizer Bellphoenix. I could tell that the man behind recent incidents had planned this, too. His motives were unclear, but we could only do one thing.

“Let’s search the forest. The spell spreads across this entire area. I can work on nullifying it once I can properly analyze it.”

I fashioned a light source using a go-to spell for dark locations, *Search Light*. Luminous orbs popped into existence and showed us what we were working with.

“Visibility is often poor in the forest at night. Watch not only your step, but your surroundings, too.”

“Uh-huh. Or else we might trip and get all muddy.”

We were born villagers, which meant this was like our home turf, and we made speedy progress. Our feet were too nimble to get caught in the underbrush, and neither of us were bitten by any poisonous snakes. We walked through the forest like it was our own backyard.

And then, we found ourselves in the middle of a cliché.

Trap magic.

A confusing host of them were set up in the forest, preventing me from analyzing exactly how their interference worked. However...

"Ireena, do not step over there. Or you might be drowned out by a boom that's all too familiar."

"Got it. Sylphy is the only source of explosions I need."

I spotted yet another ingeniously placed trap. "Whatever you do, don't touch that tree."

"What would happen if I did?"

"Your head will be blown to smithereens."

"E-ew. How crude."

We managed to see through and avoid each ruse. It was apparent our enemy was determined to hold us back, but that just wasn't going to happen. I had finished analyzing almost everything. In mere minutes, I'd be able to nullify the spell.

As if waiting for this opportunity, the space around us suddenly shifted. Something in me tingled, and I instinctively cast a defensive spell. A three-layered *Mega Wall*. A semitransparent orb covered the two of us.

Lightning came whizzing at us from all directions. A cluster of purple flashes traveling at the speed of light tore toward us as thunder clapped. The bolts split like veins on a leaf, collided with my magic barrier, and faded into nothingness. However...

One of the three layers making up my *Mega Wall* were destroyed.

"Ah. Not bad at all," I said with quiet admiration. Ireena remained silent, her face tense.

We looked at the one behind this attack. A figure in a black hood stood by a conspicuously large tree. He was a stranger, but I knew what he was.

"You're a demon, aren't you?"

No answer.

Instead, we got an intense glare, radiating murder.

"...Ard Meteor. And you, Ireena Litz de Olhyde. I swear on my life that I will nail you down where you stand."

Looking into those eyes that seemed so full of homicidal confidence, I flashed a calm smile and spoke to him, just as I had when I was the Demon Lord.

“I’ll break that spirit of yours. And then be on my way.”

CHAPTER 73

[The Ex–Demon Lord and a Woodland Showdown, Part I](#)

“Even piercing a single layer of my defense magic is an impressive feat. I must admit, you’re quite something. ... Might I ask your name?”

The demon’s reply was sharp. “Why tell someone who’s about to die?”

And then he attacked.

Claps of thunder boomed, and flashes of lightning went shooting off in every direction. The attack was loud enough to rupture eardrums, and its brightness could sear the eyes. It was packed with overpowering force, but...

“Hmph! Is that all you have?!”

Ireena was right. The enemy’s repeated strikes didn’t have a hope of scratching any more of our protective shield.

“You know about my power, don’t you? Fool me once with your magic, shame on me. But you won’t be able to fool me twice. You have power... But it will never stand against my abilities.”

Analysis and control. They rendered all magic useless. The next round of lightning attacks wouldn’t harm a fly.

“You monster...!” The face peeking out from the hood seemed bitter.

“Take my advice and retreat. You haven’t the slightest chance of stopping us.”

The suggestion was made with the best of intentions, but my opponent refused to listen to reason. His face flushed red. “Don’t you dare underestimate me!”

Geometric patterns flashed all around us. Huh. So he could summon seven different types of magic at once. Unlike this guy, modern men couldn’t even handle a *Double Cast* these days, much less a *Seven Cast*.

I see. No wonder they dispatched him to keep us busy.

That said, it wouldn’t be enough.

“Eat this!” screeched the demon, launching enough elemental magic from his magic circles to take down an entire army of mages.

Magic thundered in our ears, and the surrounding trees were blasted away.

Apparently, he could transform the ecosystem all by himself. But he would be no match for me, no matter what sort of trick he had up his sleeve.

His attacks all faded away without leaving a single scratch on my defensive wall, yet the demon continued in his endeavor. I might have called

him reckless...but apparently, I was mistaken about one thing.

Those flashy attacks turned out to be decoys.

Open! My Domain!

That two-line chant was another spell and must have been his trump card.

As soon as he cast it, the space around us warped...and our surroundings completely transformed. The nighttime forest we had teleported into was suddenly a desert at high noon.

“Wh-what *is* this?!”

“An Eigen Space.”

“A-an Eigen Space?”

“The highest form of space magic, more powerful than some of the weaker *Originals*. I thought it was lost to this era... But this really is something.” I gave the demon before us a round of applause, but this seemed to rub him the wrong way.

“I’ll beat that attitude right out of you!” he howled, summoning a sea of swords from the sky.

They instantly dropped down on us. I tried to cast defensive magic against the swords that were slicing through the air toward us, but...

“...Ireena. Try not to scream.”

“Huh?”

I tried to form a barrier around us, but...this wasn’t going to happen in the Eigen Space.

What could be blamed was a little something called Jamming. My power had reduced to one-thousandth of its normal strength, meaning I could do nothing more than elementary magic. I had to protect Ireena with a wall that could just barely hold out against the incoming attack.

I understood then that we didn’t stand a chance against the onslaught... and suddenly realized that I’d been torn to shreds.

“A-Ard?!”

I knew I looked like a mess. It was so bad that Ireena’s face paled at my grisly condition.

The demon, on the other hand, cackled triumphantly.

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I, Galamon, am basically a god in this Eigen Space! Anyone who gets caught in it, even a child prodigy, will—”

“A god, you say? That’s a bold claim and not fit for someone who can’t even manage to kill a child,” I stated, cutting him off.

His eyes widened. “Wh-what the hell...?! Y-you should have died...! There’s no way you could have survived if you’re bleeding out...!”

“You’re right. I did die. But—” My lips curled into a smile as I explained all. “—You’ll need to kill me—the Demon Lord—more than once.”

My wounds closed as if time were rewinding. I looked no different than usual, even though I had just been on the brink of death.

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding...! No one should be able to hyper-speed recovery magic in here...!”

His shock came as no surprise. In the Eigen Space, whoever cast the spell assumed the role of god, so the demon had been right about that. The caster dictated the rules of the space, which could not be bent for any reason. Even I had to follow them.

Basically...the phenomenon he just witnessed was *not* high-speed recovery magic. This fact brought a bigger smile to my face.

“But I used no magic. You might say there’s...something unique about my astral body.”

I possessed an almost infinite number of astral bodies, which meant I’d keep living as long as they weren’t all destroyed at the same time. This curse was practically unrecognizable in this original form.

“That’s impossible...! There’s no way you could pull that off...!”

“Yeah? It’s not like I made myself immortal or anything. I don’t feel like it’s anything worth bragging about.”

I was only expressing my feelings, but he seemed to think I was trying to piss him off. He glared at me, seething with rage, then...fixed his eyes on Ireena standing next to me.

“But even you’ve got a weakness! And I know just where to strike!”

Ireena vanished from my side and was teleported beside the enemy.

“?!” Ireena’s eyes widened.

The demon grabbed the back of her neck and yanked her close.

“Ard Meteor! Kill yourself if you want me to spare this woman’s life!”



“Oh. So you’re just another lowlife after all. I thought I saw some raw talent in you, but this forces me to reevaluate my assessment.”

“Say what you want! I’ll gladly become a sinner if it’s in the name of justice!” His grip tightened. “It won’t even take a second to snap her little neck! If you don’t want that to happen, then kill yourself!”

“Hmm? But I thought your organization considered Ireena a vital sacrifice.”

The demon remained silent. Obviously. He’d be pretty third-rate if he blabbed about their internal affairs here.

...The organization’s plans had changed, I imagined. His homicidal intentions were real. He would kill Ireena. Had she realized that as well?

“A-Ard...!” She called my name, fear in her eyes.

She wasn’t your typical damsel in distress, however. Ireena was a girl with a competitive streak and a heart of iron.

“I-I’m okay. You can bring me back even if I die, right? ...Just finish off the both of us already!” The fear burned out of her eyes, leaving only fiery bravery.

“Tch...! Save your breath! I’ll end you, woman!” He started to sweat and held her even tighter.

Ireena didn’t flinch.

End the both of us, she seemed to signal with her eyes.

Of course, I’d do no such thing.

“No, Ireena. You shouldn’t treat your life like that.”

“B-but...!”

“Have no worry. I have no intention of hurting myself, either. After all, we already know how this battle will end.” I called out to the demon with a blinding smile. “You say you’ll kill that girl if I don’t take my life. Go right ahead. If you can.”

His face flushed as I egged him on.

“How dare you...! You think I won’t do it?! I’ll show you! I’ll strangle your woman to death!”

This guy was a serious hothead. A dead hostage would be useless, and he was seconds away from giving into rage.

Not that he’d ever get to kill her anyway.

“N-ngh...?!” A glimpse of the face under the hood revealed his bewilderment. “Wh-what the...?! My power is gone...!”

I imagined he was trying to snap her neck, but I already knew he would be unable to do it.

“No...! What did you...?!” He seemed to think I had something to do with it and glared at me with reproach. He feared me, but with reverence, as if he were face-to-face with an unknown being. This may have influenced his final decision.

“If this is how it is...I need to make a run for it...as much as I hate to admit this! Before I do, I might as well carry out my original task of obstructing your path...!”

So his plan was to hide in this Eigen Space and change its rules. That meant we’d never find him, even if we wielded high-level spells.

But...it was no use.

“Ngh?! Wh-why?! Why is my body...?!”

I knew it. He thought he could hide himself, but he was still visible.

“I imagine you’re thinking, ‘*I prepared the spell, but it won’t cast for whatever reason.*’ I’m afraid you’re mistaken. Mister Galamon...you’re not using magic at all.”

“A-Ard Meteor...! Wh-what did you do?!”

“Nothing special. I just seized your godly throne. That’s all.”

I laid down my own rules on his space: *To release Ireena and keep him at least ten merte away from her.*

He instantly let go of Ireena and leaped back. “H-how is my body moving on its own?! What’s happening to me?!”

“I thought we’d already gone over this. I’m the god in this space now.”

“Y-yeah, right! I cast the Eigen Space! Me—Galamon! You don’t make the rules!” He scowled at me, drenched in sweat.

Composed, I offered him a smile. “Have you forgotten about my skills? Analysis and control. Even the Eigen Space can’t offset them. After all—”

I snapped my fingers, and the space undid itself. The baked desert unfolded into the nighttime forest again.

“Now that I’ve analyzed the spell that formed the Eigen Space and taken control of it, you can no longer play god. You’re as good as the bugs in this forest. Or even lower on the food chain.”

His winning hand was crushed, and the enemy had no more moves to play. He looked like he was feeling pretty sorry for himself—

“If that’s how it’s gotta be, I’m not gonna take it lying down!” He had the

eyes of someone about to throw their life away, all but telling me what he would do next.

That is...he was going to blow himself up.

“For the glory of my organization and kin!” the demon screamed wildly, and a bright flash seemingly obliterated his entire body—

At least, that was what the demon across from me had been trying to do.

“.....Wh-why? Why isn’t anything happening?”

Moments passed, but he remained in one piece. This was because I would never let him go through with it.

“If we were fighting one-on-one, I would let you have an honorable death...but seeing as we’re in the company of a lady unaccustomed to seeing people die, I ask that you save it for another place and time.”

I had immediately analyzed his self-detonation spell and neutralized it. I hoped to spare Ireena from as many grotesque spectacles as I could.

...Well, I imagined we’d probably witness something foul once we arrived at our destination, but there was no need to subject her to a sight that could be avoided.

“Ggh...! So you won’t stop at mocking me...? Are you trying to make me live the rest of my life in shame...?!”

“I have the power of life and death. I will do as I please. As victor, it is my right. For now, I’ll leave you here alive.”

I cast binding magic. An instant later, a black, ring-shaped confinement apparatus appeared in the air and dropped down, constricting the demon’s entire body.

“Nnngh...!” he cried out, toppling to the ground under the sudden strain. I glanced at him for a moment, then turned to Ireena.

“I saw he applied a bit of pressure on your neck when he took you hostage. Does it hurt?”

“N-no, it’s okay. I’m perfectly fine.” She stared at me respectfully...but also seemed angry at her perceived uselessness. “I’m sorry, Ard. I totally dragged you down.”

“Not at all. No need for you to apologize.” I offered a gentle smile, but Ireena’s expression remained clouded.

“...You know, Ard, I’d catch up to you one day. That’s why I wake up trying my best. But it always turns out like this. I always need you to rescue me, and I can never fight by your side.”

Ireena must have sensed true danger in this fight. She'd been training to fight against these very situations, but things didn't turn out the way she wanted, and...

Pause. That wasn't the truth.

She was only down about the fact that she couldn't fight alongside me.

"...You might be thinking that you have to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me to be my real friend. But that's not true," I assured. "Whether you're weak or strong, Ireena, you'll always be my friend. Don't beat yourself up over it, please."

Ireena didn't reply. She hung her head, frustrated with herself, no doubt.

...I knew she'd spring back into her chipper self with some time. I did care about her mental wellbeing, but we needed to focus on some other things first.

I was almost done analyzing the technique that had interrupted our teleportation. Nothing would stand in our way now. I prepared to cast the spell to send us to Ginny and Elrado's rescue—

But just before I finished...

"Graaagh!"

Our eardrums were assaulted by a furious roar.

My body moved reflexively as a presence drew near, vaulting to one side and casting defensive magic over Ireena to protect her. When the barrier had covered her delicate body and I was certain of her safety, I glared at our surprise attacker.

"...Oh? So the mastermind appears early."

The assailant was a single wolf.

But no ordinary wolf. Its eyes glowed crimson, and a red seal had been etched into its chest.

This was *his* doing.

Lizer Bellphoenix—and his *Original* spell.

It was clear the wolf wasn't our only enemy.

All creatures in this forest were against us.

The troop of monkeys staring us down from the treetop canopy.

Earthbound beasts sizing us up.

Clusters of insects crawling along the bark and foliage.

Their eyes shone red.

CHAPTER 74

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Woodland Showdown, Part II

“A-Ard...! Could this be...?!”

“Sir Lizer has boosted the strength of every feral beast in this forest.”

We were surrounded by too many creatures to count.

“I could tell as soon as we landed in this forest: Sir Lizer is hellbent on delaying our advance,” I said.

The forest was an arsenal of life. Lizer’s home turf. His *Original* technique could control minds to make others exponentially more powerful, so even an ant could slay a dragon.

The creatures of the forest were proving this to be no exaggeration.

“Eek-eeeeeeek!”

“Graaaaagh!”

“Scriiiiitch!”

Monkeys. Wolves. Insects. All hounded after us. The average person would never witness such a sight. Wolves wove their way through the trees, monkeys came soaring from branches, and swarms of insects cut through the night.

It was, in a word, sublime.

“Does he honestly think this will be enough to break past my defenses?” I bumped the barrier protecting Ireena up to six layers and cast *Mega Wall* around myself.

The wild armies went in for the kill.

The wolves leaped at our shields, the monkeys pounded on them, and the insect threw their bodies against the barriers. If they had been normal creatures, this wouldn’t have left a scratch. These animals, however, had been given a dose of Lizer’s power, and their focused attack possessed enough force to surpass most modern attack spells.

“A-Ard! The walls are cracking!”

As Ireena said, the first of six layers was already failing. This charge of beasts was mightier than the demon’s magic earlier. I didn’t know whether to call out Lizer for cheating or feel sorry for the demon’s comparative lack of power.

“A-at this rate, they’re gonna break through! We have to fight back!” she cried, frantically.

Fight back, huh... And give them a taste of their own medicine?

“There’s no point in blindly trying to reduce their numbers. There will be instant backup to replace their fallen kin. I mean, we’re in the middle of a forest. There will be no end to their reinforcements.”

If we prioritized that method, we’d get tripped up. Not that standing by and waiting was an option. In fact, that was exactly what the enemy wanted. Lizer always said that war was about numbers, and he was right. When the difference between an opponent was overwhelming enough, anyone normally would be crushed.

Notice how I said “normally.” Every rule has an exception. And Ard Meteor was one of them.

“I’ll teach them that the number of troops doesn’t necessarily determine victory or defeat,” I proclaimed.

Then, I unleashed the best card in my hand.

All roads lead to despair.

That is the way of life for a pitiful man.

I began to chant for my *Original*. The creatures struggled even harder to stop me, and the first layer of my protection spell for Ireena was pulverized, but my heart remained calm. I carried on.

In complete solitude is he.

For there are those who follow his lead

But none to rule together with him.

I kept one eye on my surroundings... The caster, Lizer, was nowhere to be seen.

That wasn’t to say he wasn’t around. For his *Original*, he had to maintain a fixed distance with the target or its effect would weaken. He had to have been using an invisibility spell to creep around nearby.

There is not one who understands.

All are eager to leave his side.

The second barrier was obliterated. Ireena had broken into a cold sweat, but her eyes still conveyed full faith in me—as well as frustration at her own powerlessness, but...

I had to meet her expectations.

Cast away by his one and only friend.

He sinks into a sea of madness and isolation.

The spell was almost complete. I could feel the beasts’ ferocity

intensifying with every passing second.

Third barrier, now gone.

Rest without peace.

Drown in anguish and despair.

That which guides this tale.

I was ready.

Time for some payback.

Private Kingdom—the Story of a Lonely King.

As the fifth layer of the defense spell protecting Ireena started to crack, I let loose my greatest weapon. An inky aura, darker than night, snaked around one arm and transformed into a long chain... Attached to it was a large, dark sword.

Full-Body Transformation, Phase I.

Power started to surge within me. I looked over my shoulder at Ireena and smiled.

“I’ll be finished in no time. Hang on for a moment.”

Ireena nodded. I reinforced her remaining barrier before anything else, then...stepped forward to face the wild.

No normal human could expect to witness such a sight in their lifetime.

It was like the world had frozen in time. The maddened beasts and creatures were now motionless, having been stopped from raging toward me. I slayed them all. It would have been faster to burn down the forest, but that seemed a little extreme. I wasn’t about to take innocent lives.

I knew I could win without going that far.

After I had taken care of things...I looked to the west—at a normal tree.

I glared at the space next to it. “Did you really think you could trick me?”

I launched myself off the ground and closed in, slicing my black sword through the empty space.

Sure enough, the blade was met with resistance. Something hard was stopping it from moving. A moment later, I could hear metal scraping against metal.

“...I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised,” said a solemn voice.

One would not have been able to detect anything at first glance. There was no figure, of course—no aura or scent. But there was no question he was there.

“Believe me, your invisibility spell is as impressive as ever, but you can’t fool me,” I said.

Realizing there was no longer any point in hiding, he dropped his guise. He was only a hazy outline at first, then he gradually came into focus.

An old, sturdy warrior. Years etched across his face.

Lizer Bellphoenix appeared, looking largely the same as always. He was dressed not in the pure white robes of a pope, but in jet-black armor—magical equipment he had favored in olden times. They were endowed with defensive power, and one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who could so much as nick it.

To top it off...the giant mace that had blocked my attack and was now pressing against me in locked combat always materialized whenever Lizer used his *Original*.

“So you didn’t just plan an ambush using your best spell. You dragged your favorite outfit from the closet, huh? Someone’s putting in the extra mile. ...What the hell are you planning?” I glared at the old general, and my black sword remained locked with his mace.

“What are you trying to pull by joining forces with the demons?” I asked. “Why start this war? Even you can see the continent has been a wreck ever since the incident in Megatholium. There’s no way you could be blind to what would happen if we went to war now.”

Lizer said nothing.

I continued my tirade. “Because you encouraged the Asylas Federation into attacking Laville, I imagine war will break out among the Five Powers. Depending on how things play out, the entire continent may be subjected to a tragic outcome. Not just for adults. For the children you love so much, too. Don’t you get it, Lizer Bellphoenix...?!”

He finally spoke up. “Are you that afraid to lose what you’ve gained in this era?”

I scowled when he asked me that.

“Obviously. Why wouldn’t I be? That’s why I hate you for starting this war.”

Including my past life, I'd been alive for an entire millennium. Most of my time had been polluted by memories of war, and I was sick of it. Fighting always seemed to take everything I loved most away from me.

"I lost my friends in ancient wars sparked by stupid feelings, like Justice. Like faith and stubbornness. You, of all people, should know that. And how I suffered for it."

If I didn't do something about this current battle, I'd lose more friends. Ginny and Elrado, obviously, and everyone else at the Academy if they were enlisted to serve in the military.

"I reincarnated and finally made friends. I'm not about to let them end up as victims in your stupid games...! Never...!"

This desire let me channel more power into my sword. Our deadlock shifted in my favor, and Lizer exhaled with narrowed eyes.

"It's a dog-eat-dog world out here. If you wish to see your dreams realized, you must steal the dreams, ideals, and hopes of someone else." The strength of Lizer's mace intensified, and his aura became almost overbearing

"I want to create a brighter future for all children," he continued. "To do that, I must steal *your* hopes. I will pluck *your* dreams and longings, *your* desire for a joyous future with your friends."

Lizer unleashed a mass of power.

"Nraaaaaaagh!" he roared, and the power traveling through his mace was multiplied.

Then...his eyes flashed crimson, and a carved symbol appeared on his breastplate.

"Interesting...! An evolved version of what you showed us in Megatholium, huh?" I asked. "Seems like you have more where that came from...!"

As far as I knew, Lizer could manipulate those struck by his mace and enhance their power. Anyone attacked by those already under his influence would be subject to his control as well.

Over the course of thousands of years, however, Lizer's greatest weapon had apparently evolved to a point where it was unrecognizable.

"Nragh!" His mace disrupted the equilibrium between us.

His physical strength now far exceeded my own. He used his power to toss me into the air and sent me crashing through the middle of the forest. I

knocked down every tree in my wake.

“I knew it. Looks like Phase I won’t be enough to take him down.”

In that case...

“Lydia. Brave Demon Full Body, Phase II.”

“UNDERSTOOD. PHASE II, STAND BY.”

Once the indifferent voice in my head confirmed Phase II...darkness began to shroud my body, and I began to transform. Jet-black armor wrapped around me, and my hair color faded into a pure white.

My feet hit the ground the moment I entered my second form and—

“Lizer Bellphoenix. Just as you have grown and reflected over these last few thousand years, I have worked on the power of emotion. Allow me to show you.”

Releasing all the energy I could muster, I launched full force at my incoming enemy. Our legs closed the distance in an instant. Sword and mace scraped against each other.

A shock wave spread around us. Lizer grunted in anguish. “Ngh...!”

My sword knocked away the large mace he wielded. Lizer was thrown off balance, and I mercilessly moved closer to rip into him.

“Ragh!”

“Tch!” Lizer leaped back and dodged my diagonal swing by a hair’s breadth. My blade grazed part of his armor, and...left a scratch on the invincible protective cover that Lizer so loved.

“...If my memory serves me, that form of yours doesn’t possess such strength,” he murmured, tracing the cut in the armor with his finger. “Is it the power of emotion and an attachment to friendship that gives you strength? I suppose...it matters not.”

There wasn’t the slightest trace of dread in those eyes. In fact, every second seemed to bring more animosity in him.

“Hah!” He had no fear of my sword and stepped forth with dauntless courage.

One of my attacks could take him out, astral body and all, yet he pressed daringly on. Conviction kept the old warrior, Lizer Bellphoenix, going.

The same could be said for me. Like him, I had something I could never give up: a brilliant future with my friends. And to protect that...

“You’re the loser here, Lizer Bellphoenix!”

“Nay! You’ll be tasting bitter defeat!”

We announced our vow to fight this out and clashed in battle. For some time, we were matched in power...but that delicate balance was beginning to slip.

And the one reigning supreme...was me, Ard Meteor.

“Gah!” Lizer’s face twisted, his armor newly marred.

Just a bit more. If I managed to take things just a step further, I could slice him in half. That was what I was after. If my enemy did nothing, I’d win in fourteen moves.

But...considering who I was dealing with, there was no way he’d just take it without a fight. In fact, I could tell he had something on standby. As soon as he put his plan into action...

“Eek?!”

A small cry came from the distance. Ireena.

...I was going to protect Ireena at all costs and employed magical means to keep an eye on her during my fight with Lizer. He was reflected in my right eye and she in my left.

The demon had thrown off his chains and was approaching her with flashing crimson eyes. Yet another instance of Lizer’s *Original* technique in action.

Anything struck by the mace would turn into an elite soldier for him—as exhibited by Lizer’s attack in Megatholium.

“So this has all been part of your plan. That demon was a sacrifice and key pawn. As crooked as ever, I see.” We glared at each other.

Ireena, however frightened, was now facing her own opponent bravely.

“T-take this!” she cried, casting an advanced *Giga Flare*.

Flames spun like a tornado to take down the demon. Hot wind blasted through our surroundings, mercilessly burning every tree and flower. Not even ashes were left behind.

And yet...the same couldn’t be said of the demon. Despite taking a direct attack, her opponent had been largely unharmed.

“H-how...?!” She’d powered up her attack with everything in her arsenal, but this outcome left her stunned.

The demon took one step closer, then another.

“Ugwaghh...” he said incomprehensibly, strange and ominous like some evil spirit. It would have sent any woman or child screaming, but...Ireena asked no help of me. She was doing her best to overcome him by herself.

I wanted to praise her spirit, but I couldn't just let her fend for herself. She didn't stand a chance of beating him, and I knew I had to step in. Injuring her pride was better than allowing her to fall victim to this demon.

"Even a man like you can tell I'd rush to Ireena's aid. You've no doubt worked it into your calculations. However..." I stared at Lizer. "No matter what tricks you try to pull, you won't land a single hit on me. I'll show you."

Lizer and I would act at the same time—the moment when Ireena was in imminent danger. We must have been observing the same things: holding the enemy in the right eye and Ireena in the left. Lizer and I glared at one another, then...

"S-stay away!"

Just as her life lay in jeopardy...There came the most shocking development.

"Raaaaaaaaah!"

It was a familiar voice, a sweet one. Totally out of the blue.

The girl appeared out of nowhere, flaming crimson hair whipping around, as she madly rushed forward... With the Holy Sword in her hand, she slayed the demon with a swing of her blade.

"No perverts are getting anywhere near my big sis!"

It came like a bolt from the blue. And its name was—

"S-Sylphy?!"

It was my friend, Sylphy Marheaven.

It seemed even Lizer hadn't predicted that she might intrude.

"...This one ruins everything. As vexing as ever, I see," he grumbled.

It was as if she had heard him, despite the distance. Using a farscape spell, I could see Sylphy yelling with my right eye.

"This sensation...! Lizer! You're around here somewhere, right?! Come out, so I can give you a proper whupping!"

...Sylphy had considered Lizer a friend, which was precisely why she couldn't forgive him for attacking us. And Lizer seemed to understand, which was why he refused to show himself in front of her.

“It appears my plans have been for naught. I suppose I have no choice but to trust *their* power.” Lizer’s body began to grow hazy and fade away. Was he using some sort of magic or sorcery I didn’t know about? He was going to disappear before I had a chance to fully analyze it.

As expected of Lizer Bellphoenix. He had thought of everything, including an escape route.

“If all goes according to plan, this will be our final farewell. I only pray that will be the case.” With those sinister parting words, the old warrior winked out of sight.

“*Sigh*... I wanted to settle things here and now if I could. Nothing’s ever easy.”

I canceled my *Original* and returned to my usual form before I made my way back to Ireena and Sylphy. The redhead greeted me with a sullen look.

“Lizer got away again, huh? He did it in Megatholium, and now he’s back at it again, the coward!” She huffed angrily, and I offered a wry smile before turning to Ireena.

“Are you all right, Ireena?”

“...Yes. Sylphy saved me.” Ireena seemed relieved to be safe, grateful to Sylphy, and.....discouraged by her own powerlessness. I could read this all in her expression.

If I wasn’t careful in my approach, I’d accidentally drive a knife into her heart. I looked away from her and asked a question of Sylphy instead.

“And why are you here? Did you sense some sort of foul presence?”

“Nope. Total coincidence. I’m only here because I was researching where the tastiest monsters lived. You know, I was just eating a weird-looking boar. You want some?”

“Thank you, but I think I’ll pass.”

You’re looking for monsters to eat? Weren’t you traveling to train?

...Sheesh, I never knew what Sylphy—who was basically like my little sister—would do next. That said, her spontaneity had gotten us out of a tough spot.

If what Lizer had said was true, we had likely been in some level of danger. Sylphy had done us a solid back there.

“What are you two doing here anyway? Weren’t you home?”

“Yes. We were going to enjoy some time in the village, but—”

I launched into an explanation of the course of events thus far. When I

finished, Sylphy's eyes were as round as saucers.

"G-Ginny's land was attacked by another country?! Th-this is bad!"

I knew now that she hadn't heard about this.

"We can't just stand here! We gotta go save Ginny!"

"We're going to teleport to the besieged town now. ...Ireena, are you ready?"

"I am. I won't let you down anymore," she replied, nodding firmly, eyes earnest.

In my opinion, she seemed too zealous...but if anything happened, I'd be there for her.

We teleported to our destination—me and Ireena, plus Sylphy, a friend we could trust.

CHAPTER 75

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Captured Friend

The territory near the Laville-Asylas border was also known as the Defender Line. This land was ruled by Duke Spencer and Viscount Salvan. The latter were a noble family that served the former. This territory acted as the nation's first line of defense.

That meant there were fortresses stationed along the border, and the towns near them had become walled cities. Seizing it was no easy task...or so one would think.

The nearly impregnable wall that was the Defender Line had been conquered, though the government had put nearly all its resources into constructing it. Right now...even those fortress cities were looking like hellholes.

The town of Samuel was home to underground dungeons and was known to be an adventurer's nest that brimmed over with enthusiasm and energy. Currently, however, fire, screams, and the sour stench of battlefields filled the air.

"What a ghastly thing to be greeted to," I said.

"It's like we've gone back in time. ...I was hoping I'd never go through this again."

Sylphy and I were used to war, so we didn't think too much of this. It was a surreal sight: flames burning in the night, sporadically illuminating corpses on the roadside. Somewhere, an explosion went off, which seemed to invite the shouts of allies.

It was nostalgic. I could feel the familiar air of battle.

However...I had to remember it was Ireena's first time in hell.

The girl might have possessed nerves of steel, but even she couldn't hide her agitation. She hadn't been able to speak a word since we'd arrived.

"Let us know immediately if you're feeling unwell. I can cast a spell to provide you some momentary relief."

“...Right. Thank you,” Ireena replied, staring at the bodies strewn about. She was sweating.

Sylphy gravely looked over our surroundings. “None of these are civilians. They’re either military men or...adventurers, maybe? The civilians may have all evacuated or been taken hostage. The latter would be pretty hard to pull off, though.”

Her attention to this point was what marked her as a soldier. I voiced my own theory.

“So it’s the former, then. I’ve visited the border fortresses myself. On each trip, I outfitted them with some traps that are not easily overcome.”

“Huh. I guess they were able to buy enough time to announce the evacuation to the civilians and actually get them moving.”

Though she was an idiot on most days, Sylphy was a seasoned soldier. Abandoned at an early age, she was rescued by Lydia and taught the way of the warrior, marching into her first battle and raising the decapitated heads of her enemies by age seven. A survivor of the battlefield, raised by war, she let her stupidity fade to reveal true wisdom.

“If there are no civilian hostages, the only ones fighting back are adventurers rising up in righteous indignation and the knights sent by the lords of the domain. ...I guess that means I can let loose.” Sylphy looked at me as she hefted Demise-Argis over her shoulder. “Well...Ginny is our top priority.”



“Yes. And the magical presence here is unquestionably hers.”

We had no idea where she was fighting, and there was the possibility that the magic we picked up on was just *residue*. At any rate, we’d have better luck if we cast a wider net to look for her. That said, I was still going to keep Ireena close by me. I could never allow a girl unaccustomed to war to go off on her own.

“Whether or not we find Ginny, Sylphy,” I said, “We should decide on a signal to regroup.”

“Just shoot a light-bullet spell into the sky. We’re basically like reinforcements, so we shouldn’t worry about our plans leaking to the enemy.”

“You’re right.”

Once that was decided...

“Well, I’m gonna head west. You guys cover the east for me.”

With that, Sylphy raced farther into the town, tearing through it like a blast of wind.

“Shall we be going, Ireena?”

“Y-yeah...”

I strolled through the townscape that reeked of death, listening to the destruction. Next to me, Ireena’s face was ghostly pale. As expected. She was unaccustomed to the sight of corpses and witnessing death in all its forms. It would, of course, sicken her.

But she remained brave. Pale though she was, she seemed set on saving Ginny.

I’ll endure anything for my friends, no matter how revolting, her eyes seemed to say.

...But battlefields were hellscape, and it was starting to wear on Ireena’s heart.

“Die! Die! Diiieeee!” A young knight stabbed the corpse of an enemy orc who was already dead.

“P-please! I—I have a wife and child—” An old soldier mercilessly skewered a foe begging for his life.

Tableaus of war met us along the way.

...If this had been an ancient battlefield, I wouldn’t have given it a second thought. This, however, was the present—in the land where I had met my new friends.

I couldn’t stop imagining my friends taking part in these tragic scenes.

Ireena seemed to be thinking the same thing. “If the war continues... everyone at the Academy will be enlisted to fight...”

“...Even child mages make valuable soldiers,” I said. “They’ll mobilize the student body.”

“If that happens...I wonder if we’ll all have similar looks on our faces...”

She was talking about the terrified expression of the one about to be killed and the dark look of satisfaction that seemed to seep from the killer’s. If our friends were sent out into battle, part of them would go mad. Then...there would be no bright future waiting for them.

“To prevent that, we must put a stop to this war, but rescuing Ginny and Elrado comes before all else. Let’s complete our mission first.”

Ireena nodded, silent now. With purpose, we pressed farther into the inferno, and then...we heard a familiar voice.

“You think I’d die here? Try again!” echoed a frantic voice.

Ireena and I looked at each other.

“Th-that voice just now...”

“Let’s go. *He’s* in danger.”

We raced in the direction the shout had come from. And then, we saw him. The eldest son of a duke, Elrado.

His full-body silver armor was partially destroyed and not serving its intended purpose. Slivers of exposed skin and his orange hair were red with blood. It hurt just looking at him. He was surrounded by enemy soldiers—

“The little shit keeps resisting death.”

“Let’s just take his kid brother if we need to take a hostage.”

“As payback for burning my arm, I’m gonna torture him to death.”

So they seemed homicidally inclined. Elrado looked ready to fight back, clutching to his will to live, even in the face of despair.

...But there was no chance he’d die here.

Why? Simple. I wouldn’t let him.

“*Rock Impact.*” I cast the entry-level earth magic over each enemy.

Clods of earth and stone rained down on them from magic circles sketched out in the sky. It was enough to knock out some of them and make the others fall to the ground with broken limbs.

The enemy was done away with in an instant, and Elrado stared at me with enormous eyes. “A-Ard...?! And Ireena...?! Why are you here...?!”

“We heard from a certain person that you and Ginny were in danger and

decided to pay a visit,” I explained as I simultaneously cast healing magic over Elrado. His sorry appearance returned to normal. “Well, Elrado? Are you the only one participating in this battle?”

“...No. Ginny is fighting under my command.”

“And where is she now?”

Elrado grit his teeth.

...What's with that reaction? Don't tell me the worst has already happened.

I waited, worried for my friend's safety, for Elrado's next words.

“She was taken as a prisoner of war...! Right in front of me...!” he cried, anguished. “This didn't seem like a big deal at first...! I figured it'd be easy to push them back...! But once *he* showed up, everything went haywire...!” Elrado's fists tightened, as he trembled from head to toe.

I frowned. “Who?”

“...A half-dragon. There was one with the enemy.”

I was rather surprised by this. Half-dragons were an extremely rare race. Since they had a superiority complex and refused to associate with the outside world, the chances of anyone encountering a half-dragon in their lifetime was close to zero.

Even I had only met one two or three times, and my impression was that they hated humans...which was why I was surprised by the news. Why would half-dragons work with the Asylas Federation? ...*Weird*. I was better off asking that to the people in question directly.

“Ginny is fine, I take it?”

“Yeah, I think so. ...But those guys from Asylas are animals. Who knows what they'll do to her?! We have to get moving...!”

Was this his way of atoning for his past transgressions? Elrado seemed determined to save Ginny. But, well, we couldn't take him with us. He was the one commanding this battle. If he ran off somewhere for even a second, it would cause a significant dip in morale.

“Listen, Elrado,” I said. “Remain here and tout my actions as your own to the whole of your army. Encourage your comrades. We will rescue Ginny.”

I might have decided the plan on my own, but Elrado was no fool. He knew my proposal was the most logical and accepted it.

“...Got it. I trust you,” he replied before tilting his head. “What are you going to do? You're saying I should take the credit...but what exactly do you

have in mind?”

“Nothing much. I will act with utmost decency. In other words—”

My lips formed a tight smile.

“I shall lay waste to the enemy.”

I wasted no time waiting for his reaction and cast a flight spell. Levitating in the dark sky, I looked down upon the state of the walled city.

“...This town falls under the domain of our friend Ginny’s family. I will not allow any more violence to befall it,” I said to myself.

I cast a spell, letting magic circles instantly pop up over the city, covering it completely. Magic of every element shot out of them and destroyed the invading forces.

I didn’t kill anyone, though. Ruffians though they were, I had something against taking lives that were already worthless. I robbed them of a limb, max.

I singled out any apparent high-ranking officers to be captured as prisoners of war. I realized the rest might cause trouble if I left them in the town, so I warped them someplace else... The middle of the ocean, to be exact. The opposition was made up of a sturdy pack of orcs, so with luck, they’d survive just fine.

...With that out of the way, I descended back down to where Elrado and Ireena were waiting. They stared at me, long and hard.

“Damn. As crazy as ever...”

“But that’s what makes him who he is!”

Elrado smiled, exasperated, and Ireena looked at me with adoration in her eyes. I grinned at them and shot magic light bullets skyward to summon Sylphy, who reached us in no time. I explained the situation to her and solidified our game plan.

I once again turned to Elrado. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“...Don’t worry about me. Save Ginny. I’ll do what you said and smooth everything over.”

There was a fortress along the nation’s border that the enemy was

occupying as their home base. I nodded, just as determined as he was, and then prepared to teleport there with Ireena to save Ginny.

Just sit tight, Ginny. We're coming to save you.

Praying for the safety of my friend, I whisked us off to our destination.

INTERLUDE

The Ex-Demon Lord's Friend, Defeated in Battle—

The Asylas Federation had invaded.

As soon as Ginny heard the news, she felt her heart squeeze in fear. Compared with most people, she had her share of strange incidents, including handling near-death experiences.

Nevertheless, she was fifteen. Who could blame her for being terrified of her first real battle...?

Her duty as Elrado's foot soldier was also weighing heavily on Ginny's heart.

They'd known each other since they were kids, and he'd bullied her forever. He was like a walking trauma for her. She'd been burdened by the gargantuan task of building a close relationship with him and rescuing the city, and that was more torturous for Ginny than marching into her first war.

For whatever reason, Elrado hadn't spoken to her directly yet. They communicated via his lovely aide and avoided each other like the plague. He preferred not to see her face, either, Ginny had concluded. This was better for her mental health anyway and let her focus on the battle at hand.

When came the day for them to depart for the front, Elrado led a force of two thousand men, while Ginny herself was put in charge of twelve hundred soldiers.

Since this campaign was their first for both, an experienced general would be close by to aid them. Ginny thought it would be better to leave everything up to the veterans...but that was impossible for a noble kid. To aristocrats, reputation was everything, especially for a family that had been protecting the border for generations. Whenever a war broke out, it was tradition for the eldest child to head out to the front lines before anyone else to declare their greatness. Doing so not only protected the family's reputation, but demonstrated to others that the area was safely under their control.

For the adults to save face, a fifteen-year-old girl had been sent off

headlong into danger... The carnage made her want to throw up.

She'd been told that all citizens had been evacuated and an army of volunteer adventurers were fighting the enemy...but Ginny couldn't wrap her head around what that would look like.

This battlefield, swamped in madness, was far more horrifying than anything she'd ever witnessed. There was nothing more she wanted to do than turn tail.

At that moment, the image of Ard Meteor flashed in her mind.

What would his sidekick do at a time like this? Run away in shame? No way.

They would press forward and save people. Any real friends of Ard's would.

When she thought of him, Ginny's heart beat with renewed courage.

She moved to take control of the eastern sector. Elrado's assigned territory was to the west. While he was subduing the enemy over that way, she'd handle things in her area.

Everything was going according to plan. The veteran general who accompanied her had shouldered the responsibility of controlling their army, which gave Ginny some room to breathe. She was relieved that she only had to serve the role of a single soldier.

Ginny was a rare race known as a succubus. Major disadvantages included giving birth to only women, which meant they had to depend on men to keep their bloodline alive. That said, they were very magical beings.

Ard Meteor had awakened Ginny's natural magic talent. Now, even the best mages didn't stand a chance against her. Plus, she possessed enchanted equipment, bestowed upon her by Ard: leg armor that boosted her speed to an impossible pace, and a crimson spear that increased her physical abilities and produced lightning bolts at will. With these, she'd become a goddess of war.

"This is our next leader...!"

"The Salvan family is saved!"

"We must inform her father of her valor!"

The elderly generals were thrilled by her feats, which were seemingly impossible to pull off. As this was happening, Ginny was adjusting to the battlefield and had stopped to catch her breath for a minute.

She'd begun to yearn for Ard, perhaps because they were close to winning.

I wonder how I should tell Ard about this? Maybe I should say I fought valiantly... Hmm. No. That's not very cute.

I shouldn't brag about saving people either. That's a given, as his sidekick. But...I wish he'd applaud me at least a little.

It's always been considered a jinx to think of one's lover on the battlefield, and it was widely believed that those who did would suffer an unfortunate end.

Ginny, however, didn't believe in these superstitions. In fact, she believed thinking about your sweetheart made you stronger, and she proved that by defending the eastern sector. All because of her love for Ard.

...Defeat was the furthest thing from her mind. In fact, she *knew* they would be victorious.

Except...nothing about the future was ever guaranteed.

As if to prove this point, a man came down from the heavens to stand before Ginny and her army. He was young, maybe in his early twenties, and attractive. Platinum hair flowed down his back, and his androgynous features seemed to elevate his beauty.

The tall, slender man in the dark coat looked at her. "...Ginny Fin de Salvan, I presume?" he asked, calmly.

It was then that she felt like she'd be crushed by an invisible force.

"Who are you?!" shouted one of her bodyguards. "A soldier from Asylas ___,"

He was cut off mid-sentence. He would probably never speak again.

After all—his head had been blown to bits.

"___?!"

Panic began to spread. Even Ginny was not immune to it.

"You're...!" Ginny glared at her enemy, forehead beading with sweat. Upon closer inspection, she could see something strange attached to his white skin.

...Scales? Reptilian scales on human skin. The condition reminded her of another traumatic incident.

A creature who'd brought them to the point of death.

A mythical monster defeated by Ard Meteor.

Elzard, the Frenzied King of Dragons.

The man before her gave off the same kind of vibe.

"...I'm taking you hostage," the man flatly proclaimed, as if she was just

going to have to go along with it. He casually approached her.

“Protect Lady Ginny!”

“We’ll teach you how foolish it is to go up against all of us alone!”

Starting with her bodyguards, Ginny’s twelve hundred soldiers gathered to take him down. They failed, however. His power was like nothing they’d seen before. Her soldiers were slain in the blink of an eye, as well as their experienced generals. Ginny was effortlessly defeated, and...

“Gwagh...!”

As soon as she was caught off guard, he got behind her, and she felt a dull pain in the back of her head. She was going to lose consciousness in seconds.

Is this the end for me?

“Let her go, you cretin!”

She heard a voice. A boy’s...but not Ard’s.

This one was rough and wild and...belonged to Elrado.

“Take me instead! I’m supposed to protect her!”

She thought she’d heard something to that effect, but it couldn’t possibly be true. Maybe it was a delusion produced by her waning consciousness. Elrado wouldn’t have come to save her. They didn’t have that sort of relationship...and they never, ever would.

Her consciousness drifted away—

Ginny woke up, head pounding in pain.

She seemed to be lying on a hard floor. Blinking, she noticed how her body ached and head throbbed.

“Ah...!” said a voice that could either belong to a man or woman.

She craned her sore head toward the source, and...found an elf with lovely feminine features and orange hair sitting on the floor, looking back at her.

“Master Michel...?”

Elrado’s younger brother. He had joined this mission under their father’s orders, though he was only twelve. He had a kind heart, unlike his older brother.

“Thank heavens...! You’re awake...!” he cried.

Ginny considered her next words carefully. “...Master Michel, where *are* we?” She cradled her hurting head.

The boy looked down. “In one of the fortresses along the border. It used to be ours, but now...”

“It’s an enemy base?”

That was enough for her to piece together what was going on.

Ginny and Michel had been captured as prisoners of war.

Her surroundings made it all the more real. The cramped room held nothing more than a simple bed and toilet—one of the isolation cells in the fortress.

...So she was a damsel in distress, to put it nicely. A burden, to be exact.

Ginny had seen this scenario play out in her novels, but she’d never imagined she’d be in this position.

“D-don’t worry. I’ll protect you!” Michel proclaimed, picking up on her fear.

She thanked him, but she knew she couldn’t rely on him.

Ginny was familiar with Michel’s personality—almost too kind, radiating affection, but also cowardly.

The next moment only served to confirm this.

The door burst open and a single soldier entered. A brawny orc, clad in oddly sheer clothing, as if to accentuate his green skin and muscular physique. He looked at Ginny and smirked.

...His lewd gaze was repulsive. He looked her up and down like he was trying to savor every inch. She was only in her underwear. Her armor had been stripped off, and the chain mail that had been underneath was gone as well.

The orc blatantly ogled her breasts and smooth pale thighs. “Come on out, girl. The captain’s calling.”

Ginny comprehended what sort of future he was suggesting awaited her. Even Michel could guess at the horrors she’d endure. His earlier bravado was nowhere to be seen. He trembled in fear, wordlessly.

That was understandable. Ginny didn’t think for a second that a twelve-year-old child would take her place...but neither did she believe herself to be a tragic heroine.

Even though she was led into a room packed with orcs that leered at her...

even though their eyes were filled with the most vulgar, carnal passion... Ginny remained graceful.

“...You’re a brave one. Or maybe you don’t realize what’s about to happen,” noted a noticeably strong orc that she took to be the leader.

“No, I’m aware. But I’ll have you know that I won’t let you lay a single finger on me.”

This certainly riled up the orcs.

“Captain. You don’t need to respond.”

“Let’s just get to it already.”

“I love making mouthy girls like her submit.”

The orc called “Captain” shrugged off their disgusting comments. “Sorry, girl. If we want to threaten or negotiate with the enemy, the prisoner of war has to get roughed up.”

Ginny knew it to be a common tactic—take two or more nobles as hostage and torture the one of lower status. Then, use an enchanted item to send photographic evidence to the family of the higher-ranking prisoner to threaten them. This message basically implied: *We’ll do this to your family, too, if you don’t do exactly as we say.*

The perfect way to get your foe to submit without shedding unnecessary blood.

“But I guess our enemy isn’t really the type to fall for threats. I’ve been thinking that my underlings could use a break. You’ll be a fun toy for them. Don’t blame me. Blame the fact that you were ever born.” And with that, he gave the signal for the orcs to begin. They slowly sidled up to Ginny.

Any normal maiden would wet herself with fear, but...Ginny was smiling.

“I will say it one more time. You won’t ever lay a finger on me. That’s because...”

She stopped there, and a second later, they all heard the sounds of destruction. The orcs stopped with their leering looks, appearing nervous now.

Facing all of them, Ginny puffed up her chest, assured of herself.

“I have a knight in shining armor, you see.”

CHAPTER 76

The Ex-Demon Lord Against a Rare Breed

We'd teleported into the bowels of hell. Originally a fortress designed to protect us from foreign invaders, it was now usurped by the enemy to serve as their headquarters. It was built like a small walled city and surrounded by barricades. Soldier lodgings and watchtowers were tightly crammed together within its borders.

In the center...we had the full attention of the enemy forces, comprised mainly of orcs.

"...Huh?"

"Who are they?"

"They just appeared out of nowhere...!"

They were shouting, their torches weaving around us. Safe to say they were stunned. Everyone knew teleportation wasn't possible in modern times. Not for a second did they imagine we'd suddenly invade their camp.

I only looked at them briefly before issuing instructions to Ireena and Sylphy.

"Let's split up again. It will be more efficient that way."

Sylphy didn't voice any objections.

Ireena had something to say. "Ard? I'll go look for Ginny on my own—like Sylphy," she said, looking at me intensely.

...Must have been because she felt so helpless in the forest.

I supposed this was fine. It *was* dangerous, but I was confident I could come to her rescue if anything happened. I'd let her do as she pleased.

"Understood. I hope you find success," I replied.

Ireena nodded firmly.

I smiled at the soldiers around me. "I suppose none of you will tell us where the prisoners are. So I'll follow your lead and use more barbaric methods to conduct my search."

Sylphy vaulted off the ground. With Demise-Argis, she ripped through

her nearby enemies.

No time to talk. She was tearing through the enemy like it was second nature—the savage way.

“Giiiiinny! Where aaaaareee yooouuu?!” Sylphy called, continuously axing down foes.

Inspired by her valor, Ireena’s eyes flashed with bravery.

“*Flare Wall!*” She cast a mid-level fire attack, shooting flames that took down more enemies. Ireena followed Sylphy’s lead and raced farther into the fortress, calling out for Ginny.

“I guess it’s time for me to get to business.”

Keeping a constant eye on the two using magic, I exerted a modest level of magic to make my way through. Walking at a brisk pace, I cast spells to take down any enemy who spotted me. I worked so fast that they failed to defend themselves, and they collapsed wordlessly.

Ireena and Sylphy rampaged through the area, and the enemy voiced their outrage.

“We might be able to rescue Ginny and wipe out the enemy at the same time, as planned.”

If rescuing Ginny had been our only objective, it would have been a simple matter of teleporting directly to her and calling it a day. But this was war. We had to serve our cause. Thus, I had planned on rescuing Ginny and taking back the fortress at the same time. It was also why I let Ireena and Sylphy run wild.

“I think I’ll go rescue Ginny and leave the enemy to those two.”

I used a detection spell to search for traces of her power. It seemed she was currently surrounded by soldiers.

...I really hoped I made it in time.

Praying for her safety, I headed toward one of the lodging houses, then punched through the wall, pulverizing it. I stepped through the crumbling hole and entered the room.

Inside, I found a host of orc soldiers encroaching on Ginny.

...She was in nothing but her underwear. If I’d been just a bit too late, I would have walked into a disturbing scene. I was seething in rage by the thought of my friend seconds away from being violated.

“Who the hell are—”

“Silence, swine.” I didn’t want to hear anything this rabble had to say and

knocked down every orc in the room with a spell. Their bodies combusted into flames, and magic teleported them to a distant forest crawling with disgusting monsters.

Any cretin who would do such a thing to women and children was no soldier. Even pigs were better than them. They deserved to be monster food.

“...I’m so sorry, Ginny. If I had arrived sooner, you would not have gone through such a terrifying ordeal.” I cast a spell to clothe her in our school uniform.

Ginny looked at me and shook her head. “I wasn’t frightened. After all, I knew you would come.” She offered a cheery smile. I was relieved I hadn’t let her down.

“By the way, Ard. Is anyone else with you?”

“Yes. Sylphy and Ireena are fighting to rescue you.”

“Oh, I must be sure to thank them later,” she murmured, appearing a bit apologetic, before looking over at the door. “Master Michel was captured, too... Master Elrado’s younger brother. I ask that you take him with us.”

“Of course.” I nodded and went to see Michel. He was trembling in a corner of the cramped room, terrified, it seemed, of the war raging outside.

The moment the young boy looked at us, his eyes widened.

“G-Ginny...! I’m so glad you’re okay...!”

“All thanks to Ard.”

“Ard...?! A-are you *the* Ard Meteor...?!”

“That’s right.”

Michel stared at me with a degree of fear. He probably saw me as the terrifying man who had beaten the crap out of his big brother. Either that or he considered me his family’s sworn enemy, in which case, he was sorely mistaken. I attempted to explain.

“Your older brother and I did cause a scene in the past...but I’m not a threat to your family. So relax. I’ll risk my life to protect you and promise to safely return you to your father.”

“O-okay...! Y-yes, please do...!” he said, quivering like a little animal. It was kind of cute.

Mission accomplished. I led Ginny and Michel outside. Ireena and Sylphy must have finished up their investigation because we ran right into them.

“Sylphy, what happened to the enemies over that way?”

“Annihilated, pretty much. And, sweet! You found Ginny.”

Annihilated, huh? Now that she mentioned it, I didn't hear anything from the enemy's side. Safe to say we'd taken back the fortress, too.

"...Miss Ireena."

"...Ginny."

Next to me and Sylphy, they stared at one another, fidgeting for a second before they...began their usual squabbling.

"Hmph. Pretty careless of you to get caught," Ireena scoffed. "You totally ruined our break."

"Oh, you're here, Miss Ireena? I would have managed just fine with Ard."

A prickly exchange on the surface, but I imagined they were dealing with their own emotions: Ireena was relieved that Ginny was safe. Ginny was happy to know that her friend had come running to her aid. At least, that was how it looked to me.

"By the way, Ard. Who's the little guy there?"

"Ah, this is—"

As I was explaining, thunder clapped, and a rush of purple lightning rained down on us. I instantly cast a *Wall*. A ball of fire covered all of us, saving us from harm.

"...Stand back."

As I stared down this random enemy, I realized something.

So this is the half-dragon I heard about.

Long platinum hair reached his back, swaying in the night wind. His tall, slender body was cloaked in a bulky dark coat, both hands stuffed in his pockets. The man was striking, except he was completely covered in reptilian scales. It was a grotesque sort of beauty, if that makes sense.

The half-dragon looked at me. "...Are you Ard Meteor?"

"That would be me."

He seemed to radiate murder. "...How could you command my master's attention when I, Arcella, have not?" Arcella shot me a death glare, voicing his fit of jealousy.

In that same instant—something shot through my head. It felt like I'd been hit with a hammer. I knew it was an enemy attack, but there was no magic circle in sight.

The dragons had their own magic language, and a secret way to conceal magic circles. There was no way of knowing when a spell had been cast, which was a huge advantage for them in a magic battle. Plus, I couldn't even

tell *what* he would cast. It was an ambush spell that I couldn't avoid. I imagined he could finish most foes off with one clean hit.

"...I knew that wouldn't be enough to get rid of you."

Had I been anyone else, it would have blown my head to bits, but it was nothing to me. The barrier I had instinctively put up had cut the damage by half.

"For a lower life-form, you have an abnormal amount of magic. ...Not that it stands any chance against mine." He seemed full of fight.

The real battle was about to begin.

"Listen up. Don't interfere," I said to my friends. "I'll take care of him on my own."

Sylphy remained calm and composed. Michel nodded, falling flat on his behind. Ireena and Ginny silently assented, sweating. They must have been remembering when we went against *her*: the Frenzied King of Dragons, Elzard.

The man before us, Arcella, gave off the same kind of vibe. There was a good chance that he possessed a level of power not found in the modern world. After all, he didn't even seem too fazed by my immortality. That could mean he possessed something that could destroy all my astral bodies in one hit.

"You're stubborn, I'll give you that. But...I bet you'll be helpless against *this*, tough guy."

A black hole opened in the space directly next to him. Arcella put his hand inside...and produced a giant sword. It looked as if it had been processed from the bones of some creature and gave off an ominous aura that rattled me to my core.

"Our people's greatest treasure, made from the bones of our great ancestor, the Sky Dragon. These bones are powered by eating your soul..." He readied the sword. "The slightest wound will kill you instantly."

He stepped forward.

His speed was godlike. He was immediately upon me and within range of delivering a death blow.

"Haaah!" He swung the dragon-bone sword with a shout. Vaulting to the side to avoid the reverse shoulder slash, I put distance between myself and the others.

Arcella kicked off the ground, closing in on me in a heartbeat.

“Haaaaaaaah!” He unleashed his attacks at dizzying speed. I heard his sword whipping through the air after it already passed. If sound couldn’t keep up with Arcella’s pace, he was an outlier. He would have been right at home in the ancient world.

“Wh-what the...?!” He broke into a sweat. “Why am I not landing my hits...?!”

He had attacked me about 967 times. I had seen through each one. I smiled, continuing to dodge his blows.

“You made the right choice. Magic would have been useless against me. In fact, it might even work against you. That’s why you decided to take me out with swordplay alone, right?”

Arcella said nothing, fine features crumbling in despair.

I went on. “Nothing wrong with your decision, but...your premise was all wrong. You thought you could eliminate my strengths and win with your sword. That was a grave error.”

I flashed a blinding smile. “Why believe I’m not versed in the ways of the sword? I find your line of thinking hard to follow.”

Magic might be my forte, but I wasn’t a bad swordsman. Back in the old days, I could stand toe-to-toe with even Olivia. There was no doubt Arcella’s skills were impressive. But compared with Olivia in her heyday, he was as good as a baby chick.

“I’ve already seen all you’ve got. Why don’t we end this battle already?”

“Tch...! Don’t underestimate me!” he roared, swinging at me at the same time. There were, however, too many ways for me to strike against him. I dodged the vertical slash and...struck him right in the chest with an open palm.

“Gwagh?!” The impact rang through him and tore up his bronchial tube. Arcella started to cough up blood and collapsed to the ground.

“I-incredible...!” Ginny cried. “You’re a special one, Ard...!”

“Really? I bet I could have handled that guy,” Sylphy said.

“.....It seems I still have a long way to go,” Ireena muttered.

Next to the three girls, Michel was crouched down, once again staring at me in fear.

Under their gazes and comments, I looked down at Arcella. “Half-dragons only obey their superiors. They would never be the pawn of another race. ... But you’ve sided with the Asylas Federation. I would like to know what

you're planning."

If it was for their wives and children, I'd have no problem with it. If, however, it was related to a powerhouse—other than Lizer or the demons—things would turn out way worse than I expected.

I was hoping to confirm this, but the half-dragon stared at me in silence.

I guess I could hardly expect him to give an honest answer.

"If you're not going to talk," I began, "I guess I'll have to—"

"My master isn't like you sheep and would never follow some filthy orc king," he replied. He sounded like someone waiting to be killed.

And in truth, he was about to throw his life away to keep his secrets. Arcella's body started to glow, surrounded by magic circles.

"A binding spell made in the dragon language? I guess it makes sense to have countermeasures," I noted.

Upon breaking the contract, he would be eliminated. It was the best technique to keep information from leaking. Arcella had used the spell to take his own life.

Nothing was left behind by the time the magic circles had winked out of sight. By revealing harmless information and giving up his own life, he prevented himself from revealing more than he should. ...Even I had difficulty parsing the dragon language, which was why I'd been unable to stop him.

"So he was willing to die in the name of his master. Seems counter to their nature." I planted my hand to my chin and pondered.

That meant we had an enemy that even the proud half-dragons would worship.

And it wasn't Dread, the king of the Asylas Federation.

Which meant...Asylas wasn't going on a rampage after all.

Lizer. The demons. The Asylas Federation. The unseen mastermind. Their motivations were unclear, and we couldn't be certain if they were working together.

I knew I'd solve even that mystery sooner or later.

At the moment, I had to focus on dealing with the situation before me.

Ginny and Elrado's little brother were safe.

We weren't out of the woods yet. In fact, things were just getting started.

"Ginny. Where are your and Elrado's parents now?"

"On patrol in a separate fortress located on the front lines."

“Then we’ll head there. We need to work together with your families to expel the enemy army.”

With our new objective in mind, I cast teleportation magic once again... all while feeling something about Arcella’s final words prickle the inside of my heart—

CHAPTER 77

The Ex-Demon Lord Meets a High-Ranking Noble

Fortresses guarded the border of Laville and Asylas. Our destination was a high-security one. The quality and quantity of its guards were higher since its topography made it an easy target.

Apparently, the enemy hadn't thought much of its defenses. Maybe they'd gathered intel on it? Either way, they had attacked while we were off doing our own thing. As soon as we teleported inside the fortress, we were greeted by injured soldiers. It was obvious they were still on edge after fighting, since they fixed their steely gazes on us, ready to kill.

"Who are they?!"

"Are we under attack again?!"

Their response was wild and violent, unlike the orc soldiers, but their bloodlust soon abated.

"H-hey. That kid... You, over there... Isn't that Master Michel?"

"And Lady Ginny...?!"

As soon as they spotted them, the soldiers realized we were on their side. Ginny approached them confidently.

"You've accomplished a considerable task. I'm grateful for your hard work. We have completed our own duties, too. The barbarians from Asylas have been removed from the town," Ginny announced as if she'd done it herself.

I imagined she wanted to give the credit to me, but...she was being mature and discerning. It was better for a known aristocrat to claim victory than some random boy. It would boost confidence in her soldiers.

"Ohh! As expected of Lady Salvan!"

"Even at such a young age, the Spencer sons are great generals in the making!"

"We're going to be just fine for generations to come!"

Ginny, Michel, and Elrado were their future leaders, and proof of their

competence was a source of military morale. These soldiers would fight fiercely to defend their masters who carried hope for the future and the stability of their hometown on their backs.

“...I’m sorry, Ard,” Ginny said. “I stole the glory that was rightfully yours.”

“Think nothing of it. You should be proud. You made the right decision.”

The soldiers—previously injured and beat—had sprung back into high spirits. I knew they’d be able to face adversity heroically from here on out.

“...Well, Ginny and Michel. Shall we inform your parents of our victory?”

“Yes. Master Michel’s father is Lord Gerald. And...my mother’s name is Sharon. I imagine they must be in the middle of a war council in the soldier barracks. I’ll lead the way.”

Ginny seemed calm enough...but Michel was sweating and trembling all over.

“Urgh...I don’t want to see Father...”

Based on this reaction, I could guess what sort of person the duke was. So the encounter was not going to be a pleasant one, I imagined.

I tried to shrug it off and followed everyone. Soldiers saluting us on the way, Ginny led us into a noticeably large barrack and stopped in front of a room labeled MEETING ROOM.

Ginny was right. They seemed to be in the middle of a heated war council. Listening to the voices coming from the other side of the door, she looked at Michel.

“Master Michel. Please knock.”

“Huh? N-no, but...”

“I’m a servant to the Spencer family. I cannot enter first. Go on. And make it fast.”

“Nngh...! A-all right...!” Michel was the type who hated attention. I could relate.

Trembling like a frightened puppy, he knocked before calling out. “Michel, second son of Duke Gerald! I have come to deliver a report!”

The voices behind the door immediately stopped, letting way for a dignified voice.

“Enter.” I imagined the deep voice that rumbled in our guts belonged to

Elrado and Michel's father, Gerald. Michel opened the door and entered the room, cowering in fear. We followed after him.

The space was devoid of frivolous decoration. Men and women sat around a circular table set in the center. A peculiar formality seemed to be in the air.

It wasn't just because they were making decisions that would steer the course of their future... The root cause was a man radiating intensity.

"Report," he ordered brusquely.

So this was Duke Gerald. I could see he was the perfect soldier. Elrado's and Michel's family had a long military history. Gerald's features seemed to personify these feats: His hardened face was marked with scars, and his demeanor seemed soldierly. Even crying children would fall silent if they looked at him.

Although timid, Michel addressed the man. "W-we subjugated Samuel and recovered the occupied fortress!"

The faces of the people around the table relaxed slightly.

"Goodness...! It hasn't even been ten days since we set out...!"

"A model son of the Spencers."

"It seems the young lady of the Salvan family is quite capable as well."

One of the old generals glanced over at a certain woman, an enchanting succubus sitting next to Gerald. She had peach hair, downcast eyes—a quiet beauty that reminded me of Ginny.

This woman had to be her mother.

The succubus looked over at her daughter without saying a word, knowing her own situation and rank.

...Next to her, Gerald didn't so much as smile at the auspicious report. He stared at Michel with a hard expression and kept his words to a minimum. "Details."

He was testing Michel. If his son recounted the events honestly, he'd be seen as mediocre. He was being called to prop up himself and his big brother, and to incorporate Ginny's accomplishments, for good measure.

"E-Elrado and G-Ginny fought hard! B-but there was a dragon, and Ginny and I were captured—"

This little rich boy clearly had no idea how to think on his feet. He told the truth without changing a single thing. Coming from aristocratic backgrounds, Ireena and Ginny immediately picked up on this mistake. Even Sylphy knew it. *Oh boy, he's in for it*, their faces said.

...The audience listening to the report winced.

“B-but thanks to Ard Meteor—”

“Michel,” Gerald called out, vein twitching on his forehead.

The man, who looked terrifying on a good day, was now properly enraged. Michel was frozen in fear.

Gerald then spoke in a voice, angry but subdued. “Get out.”

The order left no room for argument. “Eek!” Michel scrambled out of the room as if making a great escape.

After that, Gerald turned to me. “My sons owe you. Both Michel and... Elrado. It seems you’re connected by some strange destiny to my family.”

These were not words of gratitude. The look in his eyes could only mean one thing: *You seriously make me sick.*

That was the average duke for you. Someone who looked down on commoners, whom he would never consider the same species as himself. It seemed he lived by his own standards and nothing else.

...They could be so hard to deal with when you got on their bad side.

Better play it safe and get him off my back.

“Oh, the destiny of a commoner could never intersect with that of a duke...” I said with reverence, but this only pissed Gerald off even more.

Oh, this was going to be annoying, I could tell. It wasn’t going to matter what I said. He was going to be mad either way. I didn’t want anything to do with him, but that was impossible, given our circumstances. Unless I enlisted, it was unlikely I could expect this war to end anytime soon.

So I’d suck it up and play nice here.

“With all due respect, Lord Gerald, this is a serious situation. There’s no time to be concerning yourself with the peasantry. Please continue the war council. We would be most honored to participate.” I knew I was being a little forceful here. Almost everyone sitting there looked uncomfortable, Gerald included.

“*Oh, this commoner has an attitude,*” their faces seemed to say.

How can I persuade these noble elitists? I thought to myself.

“Let them sit in.”

The door opened, and a young man entered the room. Elrado.

When his eyes met Ginny’s, he looked a little embarrassed. Ginny’s expression was inscrutable. He averted his gaze, seeming glum.

To distract him, I asked Elrado a question. “You’re early. It hasn’t even

been one hour since we parted.”

“I used that thing. The warp spell you showed me. I switched a few things around so even I can use it.”

“...Hmm.”

They used to call Elrado “a child prodigy.” When I knew nothing of the modern world, I saw him as a talentless hack...but my opinion of him had completely changed now. He could never hold up in the ancient civilization, but he was a modern prodigy. Copying and arranging spells was no simple task.

“Well, it’s not the same as its original form. You gotta get through a ton of relay points to get to your destination.”

“But it’s still impressive,” I said. “Though I guess I’m not surprised.”

“Quit it. You always sound sarcastic when you say that.” Elrado shrugged. He seemed to be in a better mood and turned back to his father. “As you know, Ard Meteor is the son of the Great Mages. And the elf here, Ireena Litz de Olhyde, is the daughter of the Heroic Baron. Also, this redhead...”

Sylphy straightened up, looking proud of herself.

Elrado started to sweat. “Um..... Who are you again?”

“*Excuse you?!*” Sylphy literally came crashing down.

I guess it made sense. Here, she was just a present-day nobody. They’d never believe she was the Raging Champion. Sylphy was starting to gather that from her past experiences.

“I feel like I’ve been getting the short end of every stick lately...” She pouted, upset.

“If Ard and Ireena join the war council, we can expect their parents to participate as well. I imagine you all realize the power of our great heroes, right?” Elrado didn’t let the stone-faced adults get to him; in fact, he spoke with authority. He really looked like the eldest son of a duke.

I wondered if his father, Gerald, was thinking the same thing. Although still disgruntled, he appeared to be convinced.

“...Sit down.”

The war council resumed, and Elrado was the first to speak.

“Looks like we were attacked while my group was in Samuel. How’s the army holding up?”

The generals remained silent. Sharon—Ginny’s mother—answered in

their stead.

“We were able to push them back this time, but we lost many soldiers. The generals survived, but...”

“A lot of our foot soldiers were taken down. Tch. Things are not looking good.”

The current situation had left the fortress understaffed. We needed to protect this territory, which was in the greatest possible danger.

I immediately thought of something we should do—

“Shouldn’t we round up people from other fortresses?” Ireena asked, vocalizing my idea.

Scraping up more men would be the fastest method, but it was easier said than done.

“I hear our enemy has more numbers and is very strong. They could attack all the fortresses at once in a wave. If that happens...,” I commented.

“You’re right,” Ireena said. “I guess we can’t pool everyone together. Even if this place is safe, the others will be taken by the enemy...”

If we gathered everyone together here, it would leave people in other key positions vulnerable. This wasn’t the only fortress we had to protect. Our main mission was to stop them from invading the country, so we couldn’t put all our eggs in one basket.

“We should ask the nearby aristocrats for help,” Sylphy suggested.

It was in the right direction, but we’d all determined it was impossible.

Elrado sighed. “They’re all a bunch of morons. They’ve got a jealous streak and refuse to let go of their pride. This combo has...kinda gotten my family in hot water.”

Elrado’s family had lived in this country since its founding and were dukes, at that. They’d been here for generations, proud of their influence over the nation.

Because of that...the Spencers had been lording over other families for decades.

“Like I said, they’ve got massive egos. You’ll never catch them openly admiring someone above them. You can bet your ass that they’ll be green with envy of their higher-ups and want to beat them at their own game.”

A clever family would weaponize that to trick people and use them for their own ends. The Spencers, however, were a proud military family—a bunch of meatheads—who thought doing so was beneath them. Instead, they

had been ruling with an iron fist without considering crafty schemes.

Elrado's cheek twitched before he let out a sigh. "We've sucked at negotiating for generations. The neighboring aristocrats consider us as an enemy. Even if we ask for backup, they'll come up with some random reason to decline. ...*Sigh*. We're in this mess 'cause we've got no friends and no connections. This is your fault and mine, Father. Shouldn't we make more of an effort to be nicer and get to know people?"

Gerald shrugged off his son's critical stare. "There's no need for cleverness. We've paved the way through military power. And we're not going to change that now."

"But we might not have a second chance... Lady Sharon, do you know when the next wave of enemy attacks will reach us?"

Sharon nodded, wincing. "Going by the information from our spies... they'll try to take down this fortress in about ten days."

It was just a rumor, but the Salvans came from a long line of skilled intelligence operatives. Succubi had a unique skill called *Charm* that could bend any target to their will and draw out information. Even the most hardened soldier who could endure any form of torture became a slave in their hands. So this information seemed credible.

"...I see. So basically, the enemy's army will attack in ten days. We don't even have what we need to fight back, so we must face the formidable forces from Asylas with next to nothing."

Dire circumstances. We were almost guaranteed to lose, hence why the adults had been stealing glances at us for a while now.

They didn't dare say this out loud, but it was clear what they wanted: for our parents, the Great Heroes, to help them out. Even though our parents weren't as strong as before, they *had* once overthrown a resurrected Evil God. They were stronger than an army. Their aid might tip the odds to our favor.

"My parents and the great Heroic Baron," I announced, "will not join the fight. I, Ard Meteor, will lead us to victory."

Ireena, Ginny, Sylphy, and Elrado nodded as if to say I had a point, but those who had only heard rumors of my skills seemed skeptical. Gerald in particular was glowering at me.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, kid. What the hell can you do?"

"As I said before... I'll lead us to victory."

Gerald's frown deepened, but for now, it seemed he was going to see what I could do. His eyes urged me to continue. I looked around at everyone, including him, and posed a question.

"How much time has passed since we lost the soldiers?"

It was Sharon who answered. "Three days."

Hmm. Then I wouldn't be able to resurrect them to bolster our army. An astral body was transported to the underworld after three days, where the dead were lost to eternity. Everything was within my calculations. We could win the war, even without an army.

First, we had to get into position. A map of the border was laid out across the round table. I used magic to form a long baton and tapped a point on it.

"You can't just think the enemy, knowing our circumstances, is coming to crush us. That's just too simplistic. Our enemy is no pack of fools. Asylas is skilled in the art of war. I believe they might have devised some clever tactic."

One of the generals spoke up. "What? Those savages can come up with intelligent battle strategies?"

I shrugged. "Many nations call it a state of savages. Maybe that's merited, but...I don't think we should underestimate them."

The Asylas were a bunch of barbarians who lived only for the thrill of disgracing their enemy. There was no doubt about that. But when you looked into their history...it was clear as day that they weren't just dumb brutes.

"Until the current king—Dread Ben Hurr—united the nation a few years ago, Asylas had been in a state of constant civil war. Asylas's past is a bloody one, which is why they have more experience in war than us," I explained. "They're eons ahead. We can start by accepting that. We're in this dilemma because we failed to recognize this fact in the first place."

The generals said nothing, so I got back to the subject at hand.

"This is where we are now. And the enemy has set up camp...here, correct?"

Sharon nodded, and I went on.

"As I suspected. They chose this location as their base to control how we think about this situation. This camp is supposed to make us think they have nothing up their sleeves and plan on ending this game by ramming into us from the front."

Between us was a flat plain. *Common sense* would tell you there was only

this route to this fortress. The enemy's position seemed to announce they were going to charge in from the front.

"How should we take action? This is the important part: I believe we should intentionally slip up."

No one was following. Even Ireena looked confused. I tapped a place with my baton.

"First, we'll rush to this area and set up camp. Their army is guaranteed to pass through here, and it will be quite easy for us to attack them."

The terrain in front of the fortress was hilly. It had steep undulations, which gave us key positions. On the battlefield, that meant high elevation. Annihilating the enemy with weapons and magic was easy from that vantage point. By setting up camp there, we'd be able to see all our opponent's movements.

"Securing these key positions will give us a geographic advantage. Based on the last attack, this would increase our chances of winning compared with holing ourselves up in here."

One of the generals tilted their head. "Where's the mistake? I think it makes perfect sense."

I shook my head. "It's a fine plan. To win, we'd need to make camp at a high altitude and secure all critical locations. Of course...the enemy has figured this out."

Ginny commented, "So that's what you have in mind."

Elrado and Sylphy seemed to piece it together, soon followed by Gerald and the generals. Ireena, ignorant of the finer points of war, didn't seem to understand yet. I tried to enlighten her.

"Let me explain the enemy's strategy. Asylas has laid the groundwork to cull our creativity. They want us to realize we'll never win the war if they take these hills." I indicated another area on the map. "Asylas will send a number of forces into the hilly region, but they'll all be decoys. The main unit will detour through these mountains to fight and capture the unmanned fortress."

This seemed to clear up her questions. Ireena nodded. The others, however, harbored new doubts.

"Those mountains are steep. Could an army really get through them?"

"It's an impossible route, but our enemies are exceptions. An army of tough orcs might be able to get through it. Their race could cross the jagged

mountains, easy.”

I really didn’t think I had to explain this.

Gerald’s next question got right to the heart of things.

“...Well then, Ard Meteor. If what you say turns out to be correct, what are we supposed to do? We have almost no soldiers ready for battle. If they’re coming from the hills *and* the mountains...we’ll lose on both fronts.”

It always seemed to come down to numbers, didn’t it? If we split our forces in two and sent them to different areas, we would lose. Gerald was right about that. It was a small army, so no amount of strategy could save us if we reduced it even further.

This left us with only one location. While that could help us on one of the two battlefields, the other would be left to invasion.

“We’re cornered on all sides, and nothing has changed. How do you plan on getting us out of this one?” Gerald asked, his eyes testing me.

I smiled calmly. “We will not split the army. As I mentioned before, we’ll establish camp up on the hills. That way, their spies will tell them that we’ve fallen for their trap. Then, we will fuse our troops and depart for the mountains.”

“...What about the enemy forces heading for the hills?”

“We’ll have no issues on that front,” I proclaimed, thrusting out my chest.

“I, Ard Meteor, will destroy them all on my own.”



Everyone needs downtime, even in the tensest of situations. Gerald seemed to understand this, and he ordered the staff to take a break before they set out.

We were granted a room in the lodge, then ordered to eat a hearty meal and get proper sleep, like real soldiers.

After the meal was finished, I headed to a separate room. Elrado’s, to be specific. I wanted to talk with him a bit before the battle. Standing before the room he’d been assigned, I knocked at the door.

“Ohhhhhh!”

A weird reply, but whatever. I turned the knob and entered.

“How does this feel, Master? Good?”

“I-I’ve never been better, Lilly! Right there! Press harder!”

I was greeted with the sight of...Elrado, lying on the bed, as his lovely maid stomped on his back.

“O-oooooh... Ah,” he said, noticing me.

“Take your time,” I replied, smiling politely. I went to shut the door and take my exit, but...

“Wait! Hold up! You’re taking this the wrong way! I bet you think I’m some kinda pervert that likes making my maids step on me!”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m not! It’s a massage! That’s it! A regular massage!”

“...Is that a sexual euphemism?”

“No! I wouldn’t make Lilly do anything sexual!” Elrado was breathing hard, and Lilith spoke up while continuing to stomp on his back.

“Master Elrado is right. This is a normal massage.”

“See? Tell him, Lilly!”

“But... Master Elrado is a masochistic pig, so I do feel some sexual undertones.”

“Lilly?! What are you saying?!” Elrado panicked, but Lilith stared at him without a single shred of emotion. Her expression was empty...though I thought I could see some delight.

I sighed at their exchange. “You’ve lost weight in a shockingly short amount of time and returned to your old manner of speaking... But it seems old habits die hard.”

He looked just like the prideful Elrado I knew, but it appeared he’d kept the personality from when he’d been a little huskier. This had to be his real self. It felt like I was raining on his parade, but it was about time we got to the subject at hand.

“I came to speak with you about serious business. Is that all right?”

“Y-yeah! Bring it on!”

Elrado dismissed Lilith from her back-stomping duties.

“So? What’d you wanna talk about?”

“We don’t have much time, so I’ll get straight to the point. Elrado, I would like for you to make peace with Ginny.”

Elrado’s face froze. “W-well, y’know... Bad timing and all that, so...”

“It isn’t a matter of timing. It’s a matter of whether or not you’re willing to face her.”

I thought back on when we reunited at the school festival. At the time, Elrado told me he wanted to apologize to her someday, though he was terrified.

He was under a lot of pressure from his family—most of it coming from his terrifying father. That triggered Elrado to torment Ginny, who was essentially his servant. Our initial meeting, however, had allowed him to see the error of his ways and fix his attitude.

That was why the guilt of everything he'd done to her weighed on him.

"After that battle, you began skipping school. At first, I thought it was because you were scared of me...but I was wrong. Elrado, you stopped coming out of consideration for Ginny, didn't you?"

He nodded nervously, offering no objection. "...Yeah. Because we're all in the same class. If I kept attending school, we'd run into each other every day. ...I knew she didn't want to see my face, so I thought I'd flunk out and repeat a year."

I shook my head. "You shouldn't do that. I won't allow it, Elrado. In the very near future, I'd like you to... No, let me be more specific. By the time we resolve this, I would like for you to make peace with Ginny. And... please, come back to the Academy."



Elrado stared at me, confused. “Wh-why are you peer pressuring me? Things are fine the way they are. Ginny looks happy. No need to worry about someone like me—”

“Don’t say that. I see you as my only guy friend.”

Elrado’s eyes widened.

I continued smoothly, if a bit feverishly. “At Megatholium, you said you hoped we could be friends. ...That was my saving grace. I was more shocked than when I first met Ireena.”

We were all scared of things we didn’t understand, especially things more powerful than us. Any chance of friendship was lost if there was fear between the two of you, I had thought.

...But Elrado proved me wrong. He accepted my power even while fearing it. He even said we were similar in some ways and maybe we could be friends. He might not have thought too much about it, but these words changed my life.

“Elrado, I want to be friends with you. I want for us to go to school and events and make good memories.And if possible, I hope Ginny will be a part of that.”

I was sure Elrado wanted that, too, but he shook his head, seeming sad.

“...That’s a tall order. How could I face her now?”

I looked at him. “Face her as you are. Ginny isn’t close-minded. She’ll accept your apology and forgive you, I’m sure. All you have to do is go to her and make amends, and that’ll be the end of it.”

Elrado said nothing to this for some time.

“...Give me some time.”

He was still hesitant...but I could see there was a little glimmer of hope.

“Our friendship will begin as soon as you reconcile... I’m looking forward to it,” I replied.

And with that, I left his room. I sighed as I returned to my own.

Navigating human relations was much harder than winning a war.

I believed this to be true from the bottom of my heart.

CHAPTER 78

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Enemy, Killed

Things mostly progressed as I had expected.

After the break, our allies set out for the hills and made camp two days later. We held down the key positions and drew the enemy's attention to the fact that we were stocked and ready.

...The sun was shining down on me as I sat on a relatively gentle slope and cast a vista spell. The magic circle appeared instantly and transformed into a large mirror. A second later, it reflected the enemy's forces on its surface.

"Hmm. About eight thousand soldiers, huh? More than enough to crush an exhausted army like ours." I observed them further and noted the details. "They look human for the most part. This one's the decoy, then."

They looked highly trained and seemed ready to take the fortress before their main players got there.

"I expect they'll be arriving here soon enough. In the meantime, I'll eavesdrop on their generals to kill time."

The vista spell picked up on a conversation between a man who appeared to be a commander and his subordinates.

"Your eye for strategy is impressive, Commander."

"Ha-ha-ha, not at all. The enemy is a bunch of morons with some bad luck. That's all."

Though everyone around him looked like a rough band of brigands, their leader was tidy, without a single strand of hair out of place. I continued listening in.

"I can't believe they're doing exactly what we want. It's like they're not even trying."

"Ha-ha. Because of your genius, right, Commander?"

"Yeah, yeah. But...I'm surprised they didn't call on the Great Heroes."

My parents and Ireena's father weren't participating in the battle. He

seemed unsatisfied.

“Sigh. I thought we’d finally get some action around here. We could take the heads of the Great Heroes in no time flat.”

Oh? That’s unexpected.

I knew the enemy had assumed our parents would be fighting in this war, but I hadn’t expected them to think they could win against them. I’d been so sure that these guys were nothing more than decoys. That they were supposed to wear down the Great Heroes so all three would perish in the battle at the fortress. That they accepted their role as sacrificial pawns.

This leader, however, seemed intent on beating the Great Heroes who’d slain an Evil God.

“With the armor Our Excellency gave us, nothing can stand in our way.”

The proof was in was the equipment they were wearing.

...Powerful magic armor. It was apparently sealed with teleportation magic, as if they knew what we were plotting. Now I couldn’t pretend to insta-kill the enemy by warping them someplace else. Plus, their armor seemed to have magical defenses. Even swords, spears, or arrows had tricks that could boost the bearer’s power.

Since I was familiar with ancient equipment, it wasn’t all *that* impressive...but there was something odd about it. Though it paled in comparison to anything from the old days, it was better than anything from the modern era.

Who had produced it? Their commander had said “Our Excellency,” but Dread Ben Hurr couldn’t possibly be behind it. He just didn’t have the knack for it.

...If I had to take a shot in the dark, I’d say it was Verda. It would be an easy job for her.

Her creations, however, were more playful. Seeing that there were no needlessly ridiculous designs and stupid hidden functions told me that this wasn’t her doing either.

Which meant...Lars al Ghoul was most likely involved.

Lizer, the demons, and Asylas. There was a greater chance that these three were in cahoots with each other.

And...it was really looking like their battle plan was exactly what I expected.

“If the Great Heroes aren’t around...I guess we didn’t need an intricate

scheme,” mused their leader.

“Well, it’s not so bad, right?” asked a soldier. “We’ll reach the fortress before the others.”

“So the glory will be ours,” said another.

“...Even though there’s not much glory to be had.”

“Ha-ha, as expected of our commander. Someone’s greedier than he looks.”

“A duke, some fortresses, and the chance to spearhead an invasion, and he’s still not happy.”

“I’m not greedy. But I did have to work hard this time, and I can’t say it’s all been worth it.” The commander sighed. “I’ve led the spies. We’ve gotten into the enemy’s head. We’re going to split off to attack them in smaller teams. The whole point of this plan was to take down the Great Heroes. If they’re not even going to show up... My heart’s just not in it.”

So he thought they’d already won. He seemed to be saying he couldn’t lose if he tried.

“But that’s not how it worked out. There’s nothing to gain from this battle,” he lamented. “I might have lost my chance to go up against the Great Heroes...but I guess I can see what the wonder boy of the Mages can do.”

It was time. Their army closed in on us.

Once I confirmed they were a stone’s throw away, I dispelled the vista magic and stood up, briskly making my way forward and facing the army.

The commander who led them called out to me. He looked like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Hey, you. Over there. This is about to become a war zone. Get out while you can.”

So Asylas showed mercy to civilians. Good on them.

“No need to be so kind to me. I am your enemy, after all.”

“...What? Who are you?” The commander cocked his head.

“Oooh. I know what’s going on. I bet he’s trying to negotiate a cease-fire,” guessed one of his juniors.

The leader looked like he understood.

“You’re wrong,” I said. “That’s not what I’m after. I mean, we’re going to win this battle. There’s no reason why we would negotiate an armistice with the losing side.”

“...Hmph. He’s a cocky one. Guess I should have expected that from the Spencers.” He appraised me. “Tell your master this: ‘Your undeserved

confidence will only be your undoing.”

I smirked. “Duly noted. But you’ll have to wait until the war’s over. After all...there’s no one to tell.”

“‘No one to tell’? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You heard me. I’m the only one here.”

“...Huh?”

It wasn’t just the commander. All the subordinates defending him and the mass of foot soldiers didn’t seem to follow.

I explained one more time in the simplest way possible.

“I, Ard Meteor, will destroy you all on my own.”

I cracked a tiny smile and then cast a bit of magic just to test things out.

An instant later—soldiers went flying up into the air before me.

The ground had exploded. Any normal army would have been finished with just that clean hit, but...

“It’s strong, your armor,” I remarked.

The soldiers had soared through the air and come crashing down to earth, but they suffered little more than a few scratches and bruises. Well, their mental state was a little worse for wear.

“Wh-what?! What did you do?!” demanded the commander, especially flustered.

I continued to smile. “It’s my way of welcoming you. Seems you liked it. Come at me however you please,” I stated, opening my arms in invitation.

The commander howled. “What can a single man do?! All hands, attack!”

On his order, the forces scrambled to spread out into one horizontal line. Some brandished swords, some spears, and others bows and arrows.

“All hands, fire!”

Their weapons unleashed their hidden powers: Each possessed a deadly spell, fueled by the wearer’s magic. The swords and spears fired waves of light while the bows discharged magic arrows. Their glittering magics were coming in to pelt me, but I just squinted, showing no fear.

For most people, this would be the end. But...to me, it looked like

fireworks.

A direct hit. The mass of energy slammed into me and bore a hole in the ground, forming a huge crater. Dust billowed in the surrounding area, and the commander called out with a sneer.

“‘Ard Meteor.’ I remember that was the name of the son of the Great Mages. Seems someone is getting a bit ahead of himself. Now, I can add you to my body count—”

“Hmm? I should be the one saying that to you, Commander.”

The leader gulped when he heard me from the smoke. “...Impossible. What’s going on?”

The smoke finally cleared. Upon seeing me in perfect health, he began to sweat.

“How could you come out of that alive...?! There has to be some trick...!”

I smiled. “Wise men will always come up with their own explanation for things when up against something that seems incomprehensible. But often, they stray further from the truth. ...It seems your subordinates and army are foolish enough to accept reality.”

They were all looking at me with the same emotion: fear. Thousands of soldiers were looking at a single boy with terror. Despite having soup for brains, they could instinctively feel that there was a difference between us.

“C-Commander! We have to go!”

“W-we can’t win against him! We don’t stand a chance of beating him!”

He berated his subordinates. “Don’t be stupid! He’s one boy! What can *he* do on his own?! He can’t even come up with a battle plan or strategize by himself!”

He sounded like a seasoned fighter. I think he believed that war was a team sport, led by the smartest people in the operation and executed by the army. He wasn’t wrong.

But...he was operating under modern-world standards. And I was going to give him a taste of some *old-fashioned* common sense.

“I’ll show you how the power of an individual can both transcend and destroy all reason. After that, I kindly ask you return home.”



“...This is rough. And I’m *used* to scaling mountains,” Ireena grumbled.

“These ups and downs are crazy,” added Sylphy. “And we gotta be careful of the underbrush or we’ll fall—eek!”

In the mountains, Ginny was with her friends and a host of soldiers, making their way through the harsh terrain. She thought on the situation as her eyes glossed over the foliage.

It’s a relief to have Miss Ireena and Miss Sylphy fighting by my side...but why...would you deploy us with Master Elrado’s troops, Ard...?!

Ginny wasn’t just with her friends. She was with her worst enemy.

Elrado. Her former bully, the reason for her inferiority complex. He’d changed since Ard had punished him...but he was her traumatic past personified. It was impossible to even speak with him around. There was nothing she wanted more than to interact with her friends, but his presence was making her feel vulnerable. She couldn’t hold a conversation to save her life.

Why would he do this...? Ard knows how I feel about Master Elrado... This is worse than getting bullied...!

It was Ard who had assigned Ginny to the unit Elrado was leading, though it was bound to happen, even without his intervention. After all, her family had served as his human shields for generations. In times of crisis, she had to protect him. Ginny had resigned herself to this.

But this pill was hard for her to swallow, since her crush was the one to order this situation. She had no idea what he could possibly be thinking.

Ginny hung her head and climbed up a steep incline. Next to her, Ireena and Sylphy continued their conversation.

“Marching through the mountains reminds me of the old days,” Sylphy reminisced. “I remember a time when I was lying in wait to ambush the enemy. When I made camp and went to bed for the night, a bug flew in my mouth, and...”

“Eeek...! I don’t even wanna think about it.”

The two girls didn’t seem panicked, even though they were about to fight in a life-or-death situation. Elrado, drenched in his own sweat, murmured to himself.

“It’s his fault that they’ve lost all grip on reality.” He looked over at her...

and quickly looked away. His expression was vaguely apologetic.

Ginny sighed. She was sure he didn't want to be around someone like her either. Refraining from any contact beyond what their roles required was in both of their best interests.

Just then...an order came for Elrado.

"A message from Master Gerald: 'Conceal yourselves here.'"

"...Good thinking. There's a nice thicket here, so it'll be easy enough. Tell him I understand." He halted his troops and ordered them to camouflage themselves.

"Oh?" Sylphy said to Ireena. "You're used to this, huh? You're like a seasoned professional, caking yourself in mud and foliage."

"Heh-heh. I've been playing tag and hide-and-seek in the mountains with Ard since I was little. It was a part of our training. You could say I picked up a thing or two."

Ireena had blended into nature. You couldn't see her at all. Even if you knew she was there, if you took your eyes off her, you'd lose all track of her.

...I can't let her beat me. Ginny, too, had been training in the military arts since she was a child. Hiding was one of her specialties.

"Nice. You're all looking good. Now we just gotta wait for the enemy to get here," Elrado stated.

"It'll be rough from here on out. If things don't go good, we'll be here for a few days," Sylphy said, as if reliving a past experience.

However...by some stroke of luck, the situation she dreaded never came to pass.

About two hours had passed when Gerald's army began to hear stealthy movement nearby. Underbrush was being crushed underfoot; presences were inching forward cautiously. It grew closer...and then, every soldier—Ginny included—sighted the enemy.

"Ah, shit! We gotta climb up another damn hill?!"

"There are so many of them. The only thing I feel like taking is a woman."

"Ha! Good one."

A group comprised of tough orcs. About two thousand of them, which was about a thousand less than what their own troops numbered. That said, the orc race was known for being tough. Despite their advantage, there was a good chance that Gerald's forces would be overthrown. Ginny was terrified

of that happening.

“...Don’t worry. I’ll keep you as nice and safe as Ard would while he’s away,” said Elrado, causing Ginny’s eyes to widen. “All hands! Attack!” he yelled.

The explosion was loud enough to carry across the entire mountain. Those skilled in weaponry raised their swords and spears and charged toward the enemy, while others chanted spells and prepared to attack. The ambush initially threw the orcs for a loop and scattered their formation, but...

“This isn’t anything to fear! We’ve got the god of war on our side!” shouted one orc, conspicuously large. He must have been their leader.

His men were ready to fight. It was kill or be killed. Blood sprayed across the dense foliage. The footing was poor, vision limited. One couldn’t move properly in such terrain... But Sylphy the Raging Champion raced through it, displaying her extraordinary athleticism.

“One! Two! Three! And that makes four!”

Like an agile leopard, she took down the enemy, counting them off.

“Whoa...! Just what is she...?!”

Elrado and the other soldiers weren’t up to speed on Sylphy’s identity, in awe of her prowess. Her fierce yet fluid fighting style left them panicked and wide-eyed.

“You go, Sylphy! But don’t think I’m gonna lose to you!”

Even though Irenea wasn’t on the same level as Sylphy, her childhood training with Ard had gifted her with limber movements. On the battlefield—where one wrong move could cost you your life—she shifted her body weight with expertise and wove past the enemy’s onslaught. Then, she cast a spell with no incantation to knock down her opponents.

As Irenea accomplished all this, she flashed Ginny a bold smile.

“You keep on twiddling your thumbs! Sylphy and I got this!”

Ginny stiffened. After a comment like that from her rival, there was no way she could stand by and do nothing.

“You think you’re so good, just because you’re used to fighting in the mountains!” Ginny was battle ready. She didn’t seem to fear for her own life, especially not after her friend basically called her out on not doing her part. She set out to show the orcs who was boss.

If her fearlessness could be attributed to her friend...so could her running into danger.

I'm going to work harder than Ireena, thought Ginny. Her impatience made her lose all perspective.

“Raaah!” cried a voice, furious, from the side. What sort of future might that bring her?

Something whizzed by, striking Ginny with fear.

—*I'm going to die*, she thought.

“As if I'd let you be attacked!”

A body blow. Just as she became positive that someone had pushed her out of the way...Ginny's lips trembled as she stared at the scene before her.

“M-Master Elrado...?!”

Elrado had been the one to push her out of the way and take the blow. He was protected by armor from the neck down...but he'd removed his helmet to improve his vision while in the mountains. This, unfortunately, meant the enemy's battle-ax had cut into Elrado's neck. Blood gushed from the wound.

But he didn't falter and returned a blow of his own.

“Ugh-aaah!” He cast *Mega Flare* at point-blank range, blasting the orcs away and leaving them beyond all recovery. Elrado pressed his hand against his neck and fell to one knee. “Tch...! Is this it for me...?!”

He had used a physical strengthening spell to fortify himself, so he wouldn't die just yet. But he seemed to realize it was only a matter of time until he met his fate.

“Wh-why would you do that? Wait, you need first aid, stat. B-but what should I...?”

Ginny was in full-on panic mode. It was all too much to process.

She had escaped death. That alone was enough to handle, even without factoring in the complicated relationship she had with her savior. She didn't know what to make of it all.

Did Elrado feel the same way?

His ashen face made him look like he was on the verge of death. “Don't sweat it,” he assured. “I only did what I wanted to do.”

His calm expression told her that he didn't regret his actions in the least. Then, accepting his fate, he closed his eyes—and in that very moment...a magic circle appeared beneath his feet.

As if to mock fate, an emerald shimmer encased Elrado's body...and the cut on his neck was healed.

“Th-this is...”

Elrado and Ginny's eyes grew wide as saucers. And it wasn't just them. The surrounding soldiers were crying out in surprise.

"M-my leg—?!"

"Are my wounds healed?!"

Magic circles pulsed into sight under the feet of the injured to cure their wounds. Neither friend nor foe could begin to understand what was going on...

"Ard is the best," Ireena said. "Even when we're apart, he's always protecting us."

Ireena and Sylphy understood whose doing this was. Ginny and Elrado—

"What a crazy guy," Elrado chuckled wryly as he scratched his head.

Ginny continued to look around her, puzzled.

After all—Laville had won the border war. In years to come, it would be known as the "First Battle of the Guardian."

Ard Meteor was known as the son of the Great Mages. And this was how he was going to go down in history.



The ambush in the mountains had come to an end and Gerald's forces were heading back to the fortress. With the help of Ard Meteor, there hadn't been a single enemy casualty. Gerald grimaced at this turn of events.

Far away from him...Ginny continued to walk with her head hung low. Elrado was right next to her.

...Suddenly, she spoke up. "Why did you save me?"

"Huh?" He hadn't expected her to say anything at all, and his eyes widened. "...It was my way of making it up to you," he replied after some hesitation, wincing.

He felt like he wanted to run away from her, but he stopped himself from throwing himself a pity party. He looked at Ginny and slowly began to confess.

"I feared my dad, and my family placed a ton of pressure on me as his heir. ...So I used you to take out my stress." Elrado ruffled his hair. "I know what I did was wrong...and it's unforgivable to traumatize someone. I can

never completely make up for it. But I want to apologize.”

Elrado stopped on his tracks, and Ginny did the same. He bowed his head low to her.

“My weaknesses ruined your life. I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart.”

Ginny could have never dreamed this would happen. Elrado—her fearsome tormentor—was now bowing to her in apology. ...It wasn’t something she could accept on the spot, but she understood his intentions... and Ard’s.

He must have been hoping that they would reconcile. That was why he’d put them in the same unit. And oddly enough, she didn’t resent him for it.

Ever since she’d met Ard, Elrado had weighed on her less. Maybe she should just let go of her past.

If this is what you want, Ard...

Right now, she was only doing it to satisfy her crush’s wishes. Maybe one day, she would face Elrado of her own volition.

Ginny held tight to that feeling.



“Hmph. I guess I’ll give that a passing grade for now.”

I was looking at a large mirror summoned via vista magic, its surface reflecting the interaction between Elrado and Ginny. All alone, I nodded.

“It looks like there’s still some work to be done, but it’s a step forward. We can leave it at that,” I murmured as I looked around me. “Well, I better get back to the fortress too.”

The course of this battle had been decided before Ginny’s group even got started, and with my magic, the hilly region was now a flat plain. In ancient times, leveling the land was just a part of war...but for the modern human, it was completely unheard of.

I hadn’t done it just for kicks. It was the only way I could destroy the enemy’s armor and wipe out its magical effect without killing them. By removing their armor, I’d taken away their defense against warp magic. And after giving them a taste of ancient warfare...I sent them to another country altogether. The naked army was probably being arrested by a patrol guard as we speak.

“I wish I could say that’s the end of it, but...”

I hadn't gotten any answers. This had to be their opening act. The real show was just about to begin. The enemy was only getting started.

"...They better give it all they've got. I'm stronger than ever."

For all these years after my reincarnation, I'd been living with a belief from my old life: that those who are strongest are the loneliest, and that using your power only exacerbates the fact. That's why I never put it on display. Even in an emergency, I instinctively held back.

But not anymore. If necessary, I would reveal myself as the Demon Lord.

For Ireena, Ginny, Sylphy, Olivia. For my parents. For everyone at the Academy. For Elrado. I would do anything to protect my happy days with them.

With this decision in mind, I looked up at the sky. The weather was lovely. I prayed it was an omen of bright days ahead...

...And I let out a happy sigh—

INTERLUDE

Prelude to Destruction

Ard Meteor was keeping busy, and meanwhile...*a certain man's* plans were moving forward.

A number of secluded regions dotted the Laville Empire of Sorcery. The public knew about most of them, and those were treated as sightseeing locations. Others, they knew nothing about.

One was Ishwald, which experienced extreme weather on the daily. Within it was a hidden village that could only be entered by a special method.

One might say it was more of a maze than a village. Those living inside it looked grotesque and possessed uncommon fighting abilities. They rejected everything about this world and did not hesitate to kill anyone who tried to enter their domain.

—One man had just walked out of such a place alive.

Thunder rumbled, uncharacteristic of a desert environment. An instant later, space warped and opened a gaping hole. A man strolled out of it—looking like a poor wretch who had just been tortured within an inch of his life. Sand became red beneath his footsteps. His body was covered in deep lacerations. The tailcoat worn by the slender figure had been torn to shreds like old rags. Even the mask that covered his face had a crack in it.

But that didn't stop him from laughing. Happily. Strangely.

Even as he experienced pain that any normal person would go mad from.

“Heh. Heh-heh...! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...! As I'd expect of my *former* master...! It's been thousands of years since the Demon Lord got rid of my leader...! To think there would come a day when I'd experience his wickedness again...!”

The creator of the hidden village was what modern men called an “Evil God.” In ancient times, they were transcendental beings known as the “Outer Ones” who ruled over everything.

And...he was the father of Champion Lydia, Ireena's ancestor, and Ard's

sworn enemy back when the boy had been Varvatos.

To collect a certain thing left by an Evil God, he'd sustained serious damage on his mask. Despite bearing fatal injuries that would kill a man—modern or ancient—he was never going to die. It was like time was being rewound. His wounds were healing up.

“Oh, my former master. I knew it wasn't you. Even you couldn't rob me of my immortality and finish me off. It must have been him—our beloved Demon Lord, who can destroy me once and for all.” He looked up at the thunderous sky and chuckled.

He pressed what he had recovered from the Evil God over his head: half a broken cube. It looked like a worthless piece of garbage, but this dingy box held a dreadful amount of power.

“The rest is up to my partner.” He spun around on one leg, holding the cube half up toward the sky. A girl materialized next to him—young and beautiful, but not the best-looking.

Her name was—

“Seems you've accomplished your mission, *Kalmia*.”

Kalmia, the one who had called herself a member of the Queen's Shadow. The point of contact for Ard and Ireena.

She was the masked figure's accomplice and most trusted subordinate.

“...I recovered it, *Al*,” she said, no inflection or emotion. Kalmia held it out to him.

It was the other half of the broken cube. The masked figure snatched it and greedily put it together with his own half.

“I wonder what might happen?” he asked, sounding as elated as a child standing before the unknown.

The combined cube started to glow white...and returned to its original form. The dirty gray surface peeled away like rust to reveal an ivory box. Gold lines flickered across it, a sight captivating and somehow unsettling.

“Keh-keh-keh...! So this is what it's like to be a child again...!”

“You seem to be having fun, *Al*.”

“Oh, because I am!”

“You seem happy.”

“Oh, because I am!” The masked figure spun around with the white box in his hand and began to speak in a singsong voice. “Three thousand seven hundred and four years, two months, three days. That's how long I've waited,

impatiently. Now, I can finally *move on*. Ah, it doesn't get any better than this!" His spellbound voice had an undeniable madness to it.

One other person showed up and called out to him. "Is that the holy votive known as the 'Strange Cube?'"

The former Heavenly King and pope, Lizer Bellphoenix, had warped before them. He stared at the object in the masked figure's hand. "Diverting the Demon Lord's gaze was a challenge most could not hope to pull off. It seems our efforts were worthwhile. The first step has been cleared."

"Right, you are. These days, he goes by 'Ard Meteor' and is surrounded by friends. He's happier than he's ever been. But it's made him blind to everything else. If he had been the lonely monster he once was, he would have seen through our plans with godlike acumen."

This "Ard Meteor" only thought about protecting his friends, which was why he couldn't pull himself away from the lands ruled by the Spencers and Salvans. They were right about him.

"I know I proposed we should push Asylas to attack the homes of his friends and keep him rooted there to let us to get what we need...but I never imagined it would work like a charm," remarked Lizer.

That had been why Asylas had declared war: to keep Ard Meteor occupied at the border so they could obtain the box.

"...So what's next?"

"We'll have *her*... Hmm, I guess I should say 'he' now. Or 'it' for simplicity's sake? Either way, it's ready. Looks like we're in for a real treat, so I figured we'd lend a hand."

Lizer seemed dissatisfied.

The masked figure chuckled. "Of course, this is a part of our plan. I thought I'd explained right off the bat. *Obtaining* the Strange Cube means nothing if we stop there." He stared at the box. "We can't do anything unless we've got the right person with the proper qualifications. Like—"

"Ireena, for example."

The masked figure nodded and broke into a smile. "Heh-heh. Our Demon Lord hasn't even noticed that in the innumerable tales about him, there's exactly one where he isn't the main character...but that girl is." He spread his arms out as he looked at the dark clouds above.

Lizer stared at the man. "You mean to use that being and *awaken* the girl. Is that right?"

“Correct. She’s a chrysalis on the verge of emerging. One more push, and she’ll show us her beauty. And when the time comes—”

“—We’ll achieve our wish.” The old general’s wrinkled face seemed eager. “...We’ll discuss the particulars later. I have urgent matters to attend to.”

“Good luck, Your Eminence,” the masked figure replied mockingly.

A magic circle manifested beneath Lizer’s feet. Just as he was about to warp, he glared at the figure. “I will not forgive you if you betray me. I suggest you keep this in mind.”

And with that, he disappeared.

“Keh-keh. So he doesn’t trust me. I have to say, that hurts.”

“...But you *are* going to betray him, aren’t you?” Kalmia questioned, tilting her head.

The masked figure shrugged. “Can’t say for sure yet. Depending on how things go, we might be accomplices till the end. But it’s all up in the air... The forces might very well work together to destroy me. And the truth is, that’s exactly what I want.”

“I knew it, you’re planning to betray him.”

Kalmia looked at him with cold eyes. After he stroked her head, the masked figure took her small hand and began to dance with her. Their steps were light, and he spun her around and around.

He thought of his beloved archenemy.

“I’m going to give you the most riotous prelude. Prepare yourself, my Demon Lord.”

CHAPTER 79

The Ex–Demon Lord Launches Forward

After the attack on the border, Ireena and I decided to return to the village for the time being. A few days later...Olivia decided to drop in and visit us during our summer vacation.

There at my doorstep, she had on her usual sour expression.

“First things first... Elrado showed up to summer school.”

“Oh. No way. That makes me happy to hear.”

Summer school was for students who had to take a leave of absence during the school year, and it allowed them to make up for missed credits. Elrado must have decided he wasn't going to flunk out. Now I was looking forward to the new school year even more than before.

Good tidings weren't the only thing Olivia brought with her, however.

“The queen has summoned you to discuss the battle from the other day.”

“To confer another medal upon me?”

“No. It *is* a feat worthy of national recognition, but we're still in the thick of it. We can't even afford a second to commend you.” She shrugged. “The queen and I are going to hold a meeting with the other influential aristocrats. Join us.”

“Okay. ...Can Ireena attend as well?” I didn't have the heart to leave her back in the village.

Olivia nodded silently, and the three of us were in her carriage in no time, heading to the royal capital. Upon arrival, we made a beeline for the castle. Beside Olivia and Ireena, I walked down its vast corridors and stepped into the meeting room.

“Oh! Thou hast come! You were most splendid in this last battle, Ard!” Queen Rosa lavished praise on me from her seat of honor at the round table. Settled in next to her was Prime Minister Valdr, who glared at me in silence.

This was usually when he'd make a scathing remark or tell me off in some way...but the incident at Megatholium must have changed his opinion of me.

He eventually turned away and focused on the two across from him... Duke Gerald and his son, Elrado.

"I would expect no less of the Spencers," Valdr said. "Any other family would have failed miserably, but you've led us to victory. It's a feat worthy of the highest honor."

He was trying to stress to the other aristocrats that the duke was to thank for all this. It seemed like he was brushing my contributions under the rug... but that wasn't exactly accurate. This was Valdr's way of helping me out. If a commoner stood out, they'd end up on the watchlist of the aristocrats. They felt the need to hammer anything that sticks out back in its place.

Valdr must have been trying to save me from that. Present at the meeting, Elrado, Ginny, and Sharon said nothing, apparently all on the same page. Ireena, Olivia, and I joined in as the meeting began to decide our next steps.

Queen Rosa got the ball rolling. "Even the enemy understands how this battle came to pass. Though they have been defeated...Asylas refuses to negotiate or retract their declaration of war. Our foe intends to fight until the very end." She looked around at all of us and pressed a slender finger against the table. "I am asking for your opinion on how to proceed."

This was serious. It would steer the fate of the nation. They couldn't just say anything.

An elderly noble raised his hand. This man was the head of a long-established marquis. His intelligent eyes narrowed. "A nonaggression pact may be wise."

"Oh? What makes you think that?"

"I don't think this is a case of Asylas being reckless. Even their savage king would not act so foolishly."

Rosa nodded...but Valdr looked conflicted as he fiddled with his beard. He spoke up.

"...I have some doubts on the matter."

"Hmph. Do you mean to say you believe Asylas has gone wild?"

"Yes. I shared your sentiment until only recently, but after witnessing their behavior at the Meeting of the Five Powers...my opinion has changed." Valdr frowned. "I cannot help but think his recent actions have been spurred on by some sort of madness. It would not be strange if he went crazy."

...Hmm. I could work with that information. I had come face-to-face with Dread Ben Hurr during the summit, but he seemed like a crazed king to me.

And what if his madness wasn't innate but something he had acquired over time? It was looking like we were better off assuming there was a mysterious puppet master pulling his strings.

The marquis cleared his throat. "Even if Asylas has acted in an irresponsible way, my opinion still stands. I want a nonaggression pact," he replied. "Whether or not the main perpetrator of this incident was the Anti-Laville faction spearheaded by Megatholium, it would be unwise for us to act with violence. We've already established that Asylas is battle ready. And if we fight on their home turf, I must say it'll be quite sobering."

"Thou means to say that violence would only result in more casualties?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. So while it might place Duke Gerald and the other families under more strain to defend our borders, we must not fight back. And...we have a Legendary Apostle on our side," replied the marquis, turning his gaze toward Olivia.

My guess was that she was relieved there was no one from the Black Wolf Order around. They would be totally against their living god being dispatched to the battlefield to protect her country. Seeing that the participants here were either nonreligious or followers of Verda, however, they all looked at her with hope.

Olivia crossed her arms and sighed. "I'm basically one of the nation's rulers by this point, so I guess I've got a duty to meet your expectations. But I can't help you right this second. I've got other things to take care of."

Heads tilted in the meeting room. I was no different. What could be so important that she'd put our current situation aside? I had to know the answer.

"What sort of business might that be?" I asked. "Nothing potato-related, I trust?"

"Obviously not. Prioritizing potatoes over a situation like this would be.....ridiculous."

Hey. Why did you pause? And why are you sweating?

"...Don't tell me this is actually about potatoes. At a time like this?"

"I said it's not. I got a call from Verda. Wants me to help out with some magic device she's working on or something."

Verda called her? ...Well, this was a surprise. I never imagined Olivia would prioritize a request from Verda in these circumstances.

"I know what you're thinking. I know it's not like me. I *should* ignore

her.”

“Then why are you going?”

“My soldier senses are screaming danger. That’s why I decided to go help her.”

...Huh. Then, that was that.

Her intuition was seldom wrong. If there was trouble afoot, she could almost always tell. So if Olivia was saying she had a bad feeling, I had no choice but to respect that. And the aristocrats didn’t have the leverage to stop a Legendary Apostle, so...

“Very well. As a house that protects these borders, I’ll make sure my deeds go down in history,” Gerald stated.

The vibe in the room changed. It was clear there was now a definitive course of action.

...A defensive strategy wasn’t necessarily a bad one. Laville and Asylas were almost matched in terms of national strength, though we had a slight advantage. After all, when armies were on par with one another, the assailant was often considered the weaker one. Assuming we would be fighting on our land, Laville would have leverage, even if only a little. Under prolonged conditions, the attacker’s resources would dwindle, and they would no longer be able to continue the fight.

If we focused on defense, it would all end eventually. And everyone knew it.

There weren’t any problems with this plan, but...

“I’m against it.”

Everyone’s attention turned to me as I quietly raised my hand. My friends—Ireana, Rosa, Ginny, and Elrado—looked upon me with goodwill...but most others scowled, as if warning the commoner to stay quiet.

Even so, I would say my piece. “Waiting them out is one plan of action, but it will take too much time... More time means more victims, and I cannot stand for that.”

Their reaction wasn’t good, to say the least.

“Tch... Spitting out childish dribble of all things...”

I wasn’t trying to seem childish. I was just saying that staying on the defense would be a waste of time.

“If I fight, this will all be over within ten days. I swear this on god. I promise to end this war in that span.”

They sneered at me.

“Hah! You think you can do that in ten days?”

“A son of the Great Heroes, huh. I guess he doesn’t think the same as we unenlightened mortals.”

“And how exactly do you intend to pull that off? Are you saying you’ll march into the enemy nation and speak with them directly?”

I grinned at the man who uttered this last statement. “Bingo.”

They looked at me, skeptical, but the participants familiar with me started to warm up to the idea, starting with Ireena. The others glared at me with scrutiny, thinking the same thing: *Now’s not the time to be joking around. Don’t be ridiculous.*

I looked around at each of them.

“I, Ard Meteor, will walk into Asylas and end this war.”

To drive my point home, I made a bold declaration.

“This isn’t just some farfetched dream or delusion. I know it can happen, and I won’t be deterred by anyone.”

CHAPTER 80

The Ex-Demon Lord on a Foreign Rampage—

Anyone who hadn't seen my powers firsthand thought I was running my mouth, but what I said had been completely feasible. To prove this, I got to work as soon as the meeting adjourned.

"You will be taking us with you, right?" Ginny asked.

"We're coming whether you like it or not!" Ireena said.

They needed the experience, so I let them tag along. I didn't forget Sylphy, of course. She would make the perfect backup if anything went awry. It might seem like there was nothing going on upstairs, but she was excellent in battle. We met up, interrupting her journey once again, and headed straight for the Asylas Federation.

We passed through the fortress belonging to the Spencers and entered the land between the two nations.

On an open field flooding with sunshine, I said to myself, "It seems the entire enemy region has anti-magic techniques in place."

"Huh? S-so does that mean we can't use magic like in Megatholium?"

"Not quite. It's not nearly as strong here. From what I can tell, the only spells sealed are flight and teleportation."

It must be Lizer's doing. Only he could pull off something that spanned the entire country in this era. Apparently, however, even he hadn't been immune to weakening over the years. Back in ancient times, he had done the same thing to ban all magic from a mass of land. Now, it seemed that he could only seal specific spells.

"So we're forced to waste time traveling to the royal capital and their stronghold," posed Ginny.

"We need to find out their objective," Sylphy said. "What are they buying time *for*?"

She was right. This was likely meant to buy time, but we couldn't figure out what they had in mind.

“Let’s keep moving. That’s our only option at this point,” I urged.

Everyone nodded, and we continued on our way, as I tried to analyze and control these barriers. I doubted my analysis would be complete by the time we reached the capital. It was easier when many spells had been sealed. This present situation was harder. Plus, Lizer was the one behind it. Not to say analysis was impossible, but I knew it’d take a lot of time.

About ten days, to be more specific.

And I expected us to arrive at the capital in nine days, which meant it didn’t mean much, even if I could analyze it. ...I was going to keep at it, anyway. I assumed they were trying to get me to give up.

There was a reason why two spells—flight and teleportation—were blocked. It was better for us to have access to them, so I kept at analyzing and dissecting their methods to block these spells.

After nine full days...we arrived at the enemy fortress just as darkness was creeping into the sky. This area was outfitted with forts along the nation’s border. As soon as we passed through the main defense line, we would be in Asylas proper.

Of course, it wasn’t like they were going to let us waltz in.

An enormous fortress had been built out on the open plain. Like a small-scale castle town, a giant gate served as its entrance. Enemy soldiers patrolling the area spotted our presence in the night.

“Hmm? Brats? What do we have here?”

“Why would kids come h—Hey, wait a sec.”

“Are we at the east gate?”

“Our citizens would be coming in from the west gate...”

“If they’re coming from the east, that means...”

They finally seemed to piece it together. They looked anxious and got into battle formation.

Against me, however, their combativeness, resolve, and preparation meant nothing.

“I imagine your duties have been arduous. I’ll relieve you from them.” I cast an attack with magic. *Flare* took care of the gate guards.

After rendering them unfit for battle, I used a power boost on myself and smashed open the gate with a satisfying crunch. We stepped into the fortress through the new entrance.

“Wh—who are these guys...?!”

“The enemy, duh!”

“Wait... That boy with black hair...”

“It-it’s Ard Meteor! He matches the description!”

“A-Ard Meteor?! You mean Laville’s grim reaper?!”

Grim reaper, huh? That’s what I’m called around these parts?

I guess they weren’t wrong. They assumed I was going to reap their lives.

“Stand back if you don’t wish to be harmed. Resistance is futile.”

The soldiers understood my orders, but they had a job to do. Despite their visible dismay, they’d chosen to fulfill their duty and protect the nation.

“Th-they’re just a couple of kids!”

“It’ll be an easy win if we surround them!”

“Taking the grim reaper’s head will secure us promotions, for sure!”

The men roused themselves and prepared to attack, but we had our own countermeasures. ...To be specific, I wiped the floor with them. My friends didn’t get to show off a single one of their moves. Several soldiers had cast *Flare*, and I dealt with them in no time.

“Is—is he a monster...?!” One of the defeated soldiers looked at me in frightened awe and fainted. They all thought of me as a beast, but not my friends.

“My Ard!” Ginny exclaimed. “Another perfect victory!”

“Uh-huh! *My Ard* just can’t be beat!” Ireena emphasized.

“Hmph! Why do you get to have all the fun?! I wanna go wild, too!” Sylphy whined.

They weren’t afraid of me. My friends weren’t going to abandon me. That was the lesson I learned in Megatholium, and it was being reinforced now. I stopped preventing myself from unleashing my full power.

After passing through the fortress and entering Asylas proper...I spent several days mercilessly destroying the checkpoints that lined the road to the capital.

“Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So you’re Ard Meteor! I’m Schlark! Strongest orc warr—*Aaaaah?!?*”

I used wind magic to send the self-proclaimed warrior far off into the sky.

That was the last of the checkpoints.

“Now we just need to forge straight ahead to our destination, the capital.”

We passed through the final station, marching across the tranquil plain. Once night fell, we decided to call it a day. Just as I’d been doing for the past

several days, I made camp for us in the middle of the field.

No tents, though.

Using molecular conversion, I built simple but serviceable houses. Each room was fully equipped with its own toilet, shower, and kitchen.

I don't think I need to say this wasn't normal. In modern times, everyone knew that a long journey meant being covered in sweat and grime and putting up with unsanitary conditions. I had largely accepted that and acted in accordance with this common law of man. I didn't want to cause a commotion, after all.

But I didn't want my friends to be uncomfortable, and no one here was going to panic over this, so...we were straying from normalcy here.

"Dinner is roasted *jingal*, paired with this herb sauce. Enjoy."

"Aaaah! Mmmm! Yuum! This is amazing!" cried Sylphy.

"Miss Ireena's hot pot last night was delightful...but nothing compares to Ard's homemade meals."

"The meat juices are in perfect harmony with the herb sauce...! To say it's delicious is an understatement...!"

I was happier than anything that everyone was satisfied. After we ate dinner and took a short break, we bathed in our own rooms and washed ourselves clean, then went straight to bed, so we'd be well-rested for the next day.

I couldn't sleep, though. I patrolled the area with detection spells while continuing my analysis of the anti-magic barrier. Any normal person would fail to carry out even the most basic functions after several days of no sleep, but I was fine without several decades of shut-eye.

"...It's strangely quiet tonight," I murmured to myself as I lay on my bed and used detection magic to take note of the surrounding area. About one week had passed since we'd started this journey, yet the enemy hadn't launched a single night raid.

Maybe they realized doing so would be useless. Or maybe...they were trying hard not to tip us off on their next move.

"I've got a weird feeling. There are too many secrets, I just can't seem to wrap my head around it."

Why did Lizer pressure Asylas to start a war? What were the motives of the demon-run crime organization Lars al Ghoul? Who was the mastermind who had yet to make an appearance? It would all make sense as soon as we

arrived at the capital, but...it would be too late by then. If we didn't come up with a game plan beforehand, they'd be one step ahead and get the jump on us.

My mind was whirling as I tried to guess what the enemy was after.

"I'm so lost. If this was just Lars al Ghoul's mess, it'd be easy enough to figure out...but why is Lizer involved and out to start a war?"

Lizer Bellphoenix had always acted on his dream of "making a world where children can live and laugh." He'd stoop to any level to make it happen. He was just that brutal... But if there was even the slightest chance that his plan would endanger a child, he'd never go through with it. He always put children first. It was why the idea of him trying to start a war felt strange.

"In war, it's always the vulnerable population—like women and children—who have to pay the price. Lizer knows that, so there's no way he would start one on a whim."

But reality was different. He had teamed up with the demons and an unseen mastermind to manipulate Asylas and declare war on Laville.

"I'm hoping to find an answer before we reach the capital...but it looks like I'll have to think on my feet."

I didn't have much of a chance of discovering the truth on my own. My only option was to continue dealing with more immediate matters and focus on carrying out simple actions. I preferred to divine their strategy and strike first...but I needed to recognize that some things were beyond my control and come at this from a new angle.

"I can only expect the worst and do what I can to prevent it—" I said to myself.

Someone knocked on my door.

"It's me. Can I come in?"

Ireena. I immediately broke into a smile. "Come right in."

She opened the door and entered the room...in a sheer negligee. Through its ivory net, I could see her breasts and plump thighs. I wasn't sure where to look...but I felt no impure emotions, of course.

"What's the matter? Are you having trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah. Well, kinda. I wanted to talk to you," she said, looking conflicted, as she sat down on the bed next to me. "...Ard, you're incredible. You took down that fortress and the checkpoints all by yourself."

I think she was praising me, but it seemed different from the compliments she lavished on me on the daily. Ireena's tone seemed docile, almost.

"You did it all yourself... And I just...watched. I didn't get to help with anything."

"...It's my job to protect everyone. I only did it to take the burden off you all. Was I acting out of line? Are you disappointed that you had no opportunity to prove yourself?"

Ireena shook her head, strangely quiet. "No. Well, it's not like I wanted to get violent or anything." She gazed downward, hesitating. "...When summer break started, it was the first time in a long while that we got time alone. At first, I was really happy, but it started to weigh on me. ...I realized I can't understand you at all, Ard."

I didn't get what she was trying to say, but I wasn't going to force her to tell me. She wanted to go at her own pace, and I was going to respect that.

"...When I was abducted by Elzard, you used your powers to save me. When I saw you, I thought you should have someone who can be your equal, but I know no one is as strong as you, so I had a feeling that you'll always be lonely. That's why... I've been trying to become worthy of standing by your side."

So that's what's been on her mind. ...She wasn't wrong. I didn't have a match even back in the ancient world, except maybe Lydia in my friend group. In a way, I felt like Lydia was the only one who could truly understand me. But...I never thought the others weren't my true friends. Ireena must have realized that during our break together.

"When we spent time in the village and climbed the mountains, you always looked like you were having a great time. Not just because I was with you. You were always looking forward to things—the future, life after summer vacation, seeing everyone at the Academy. ...That's when I realized you considered those weaker than you as friends. I was the only one who mistakenly thought I had to be as strong as you."

So she was concluding all her efforts had been for nothing. She clenched her fists against her knees.

"Ever since Megatholium, you've been smiling more, Ard. You show it to everyone now, when you used to show only me. ...It started bothering me. You might think I'm a terrible person, but..." Ireena's lips trembled as she looked away.

“I don’t want to be another face in the crowd. I want to be special to you, Ard. And not just one of the many people you care about. I want to be the most important one in your life. ...That’s what I was thinking when we were in the village together.”

...Ah, I see. I understood what she was trying to say. Her recent behavior made sense now, like how she reacted when we fought the demon in the forest and when I beat that half-dragon. She’d praised me and blamed herself for her lack of power. At the time, I’d thought it wasn’t like her at all.

But I didn’t think it was because she wanted to be my number one. I didn’t think it was because she wanted to be special to me.

Her strange behavior had all started in Megatholium.

...During that incident, Ireena and I had been saved, metaphorically. But it seemed to spark a new type of insecurity in Ireena.

“I want to be special to you, Ard. I want to be strong. I thought that if I was powerful enough to stand by your side...I’d become special to you. But when I see you in action, I can’t help but think that there’s no way I can measure up to you.” Ireena pursed her lips, shoulders dropping. I sensed something ominous in her tone and expression.

...I recalled a man I had befriended in the old days—a very honest sort with an agreeable personality, but...a major overthinker.

Once, while we were in combat together, he felt like he wasn’t carrying his weight and feared our friendship would fall apart. And so...he clung to power and ran wild, causing him to commit a sin and fall into madness. I had to end him myself.

...Right now, Ireena was walking the same path as him. I could tell.

It seemed that even she sensed she was losing her way. That was why she’d come to me. In that case...I had to shift her trajectory.

“Ireena. You’re walking down the wrong path. At this rate, you will be consumed by a desire for power and hurt everyone.”

“.....” She must have had a hunch about this already. Ireena remained silent and hung her head, face clouding over. I placed a hand on my friend’s shoulder and continued.

“Listen, Ireena. The power you seek is nothing but a destructive force that hurts others. No matter how much of it you acquire, I won’t see it as a good thing, and naturally, I won’t consider it special.”

“.....Right.”

“I’ve always sought power to help me protect others, and I see it as a tool to that end. To me, it’s nothing but a tool designed to protect. I have no interest in finding out how far you can take it. No matter how strong you become, if that’s your motive, I’ll see no value in it.”

“...You’re right.”

I could see self-reflection begin to settle in her eyes and nodded. “I’m not interested in raw power, only how it’s used... You’ve exercised your strength justly and with utmost care. This includes when Sylphy went out of control, when we were transported into the past, during the school trip, and at Megatholium. That is why you are my dear friend, and—”

I looked at her.

“And someone who is more special to me than anything else.”

Ireena lifted her head. Her eyes were wide, lips quivering slightly. “I’m special to you?”

“Yes. Although I would never dream of ranking my friends...I would say you’re my best friend, Ireena.”

I moved my hand from her shoulder down to her clenched fist. I held it in my own.

“Back when I was a young village boy without a single friend in the world, you appeared before me. You asked to be my friend. Do you know that you saved me? Who I am today is all because of you. You were my first friend...and no one will ever compare to how important you are to me.”

I think this was what she wanted to hear. I wasn’t just flattering her or trying to point her in the right direction. I’d spoken from the heart, and she seemed to have gotten the message, because she smiled in embarrassment.

“I’m special. I see. And I’ve always been special ...Heh-heh.”

Nothing was more adorable than her flushed cheeks... And it made me think that my Ireena was just the cutest person alive.

We talked a little more after that. Growing tired, Ireena lay down on my bed and began snoring gently. She was so cherubic. I stroked her cheek and cracked a small smile.

“I can see you were suffering only because you wanted to be seen as a real friend. I was worried that led you down the wrong path...and happy at the same time,” I murmured to her with gentle eyes.

“I’m so glad I met you.”



It was daybreak. It seemed the sun was shining in Ireena’s heart as well. She was her usual self when she woke up.

We continued west. It was still eerily quiet, and we remained vigilant for the course of our journey.

We finally arrived at our destination. The capital of the Asylas Federation, Hearl-Si-Pearl. A giant city in the middle of the plain, surrounded by solid walls and gates and a battalion of sentries that protected it from invasion.

...They didn’t attack us even once on our way there. The enemy must have known we were coming, but they sent neither assassins nor an army—as if they were welcoming us right in.

I had a really bad feeling about this. We had no choice but to keep moving forward, however. We reached the gate and...stared at a line of civilians waiting to be granted passage.

I turned to my team. “Listen. I think something might go down here. We need to proceed with caution.”

Ireena, Ginny, and Sylphy nodded. I returned the nod and then...we passed the line of people and approached the tall gate. The sentries spotted us.

“Hey! Th-they’re here!”

“It’s the grim reaper and his party!”

I’d known this was going to happen. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’ll be forcing my way in.”

I did exactly what I’d planned out beforehand. First, I cast *Wall* over the citizens to keep them out of harm’s way. Then, I knocked out sixty guards with *Flare* and got rid of anyone in my way.

“Let’s go discuss what we need to.” I entered Hearl-Si-Pearl, the girls behind me.

Because I’d made a huge commotion at the gate, the passersby were frozen in fear. We passed through the streets with all eyes on us.

“This tiny party thinks they can attack in broad daylight!”

“You’re on enemy turf!”

Patrol soldiers continued to advance on us. They must have thought they

could swarm together and crush us.

“Your numbers mean nothing to me.”

They were going to learn the hard way who was more powerful between us. I instantly took out each soldier who approached with an elementary spell.

“I guess we won’t get our chance to shine anytime soon,” Ireena commented.

“Indeed,” Ginny agreed. “We never have to worry with him.”

“Agh! No fair, Ard! Lemme at ’em!”

As I turned an ear toward their conversation, I tore through the main avenue. It was like a stream of soldiers were coming at us, though they posed no threat. My friends seemed at ease, looking around as if we were on a tour.

“The town does have character. You can tell you’re in a foreign country.”

“The buildings are made from wood—not brick. It’s so different from Laville.”

“And they don’t seem to wear much clothing. It just screams savage.”

“...I know I have the situation under control, but please don’t let your guard down,” I warned, as I continued to clear the way.

We arrived at the royal castle, which I assumed would be most heavily guarded, but...

“...Hmm. There are no soldiers here.”

Any sign of life disappeared as we stood before the gate. Not a single soldier was guarding the gate... In fact, the entrance was wide open.

“It almost seems as if they’re welcoming us,” Ginny mused.

“I smell a trap all right,” Sylphy said.

“But we’ve got no choice but to keep going. Right, Ard?” Ireena asked.

I nodded. “...We’re about to conclude this once and for all. Let’s find out what awaits us.”

Keeping an eye on our surroundings, I passed through the gate with the girls. We crossed a bridge suspended over a moat and continued through a sprawling garden before entering a colossal building. ...It was too quiet, and there was no one around.

“This is weird,” said Ireena.

“I was expecting a more extravagant welcome,” Ginny added.

“I don’t think we’re alone, guys.”

Sylphy was right. I’d been patrolling the area with a detection spell for a while, and there were people in the castle—either civil or military officials.

Either way, they were hiding away in the rooms, perfectly still. It was like they were making sure they didn't get in the way. Or...I got the impression that someone or something was controlling their movements.

"I know it's strange, but we need to be on the lookout for our target."

Using the detection magic as a guide, we traveled farther into the building before stumbling into an open space. Lush crimson carpets lined the floor. A throne sat farther in the room, inlaid with chunks of jewels in every color, as if to assert its kingly authority.

A man was sitting upon it. A young king with the green skin of an orc, but with facial features showing his half-elven roots.

Dread Ben Hurr stared at me with his chin propped up on his hands.

"...It's been a while since the Meeting of the Five Powers," I commented. My eyes narrowed.

Dread's mouth then twisted into a sort of smile. "Eh-heh-heh-heh! Welcome, Ard! And all your little friends, too! Thanks for stopping by! You're hilariously predictable!" Dread cried, leaning back in his throne with smile that grew more twisted.

His expression was openly hostile.

"...Let me say this: Surrender and withdraw from Laville. If you do it now, we may resolve the matter with only monetary reparations. If not..."

"Whatcha gonna do?"

"I'll behead all chief politicians—starting with you."

It was unavoidable if they refused to surrender. I didn't like taking lives, but I would need the heads of my enemies if I was going to resolve the situation. I would do any dirty deed it took to end this war. And I was trying to make sure the enemy knew that.

Dread's smile never left his face. It was one steeped in madness—and loathing.

"Drop the humble act. I know you're looking down on everyone. *You really haven't changed*, Ard."

He talks like we know each other, I thought.

Dread seemed to radiate murder.

"This...! Th-this is...!"

"It—it can't be...!"

Ireena and Ginny broke into a cold sweat. They were familiar with this bloodlust.

I knew it, too.

“I see. So that is what is going on,” I said, eyes narrowing as I stared at Dread. “I was wondering why the half-dragons would aid Asylas. I understand it all now, including your motive...and the identity of the unseen mastermind.”

I had thought this incident was the work of Lizer, the demons, and an invisible hand. I’d assumed Dread was nothing more than a puppet.

But I was wrong: Dread *was* the mysterious mastermind.

“It’s been about five months. It seems *your wounds have healed*.”

I could feel his animosity. My skin prickled. I was ready to say the name of our foe.

“Might I assume this is revenge for our earlier encounter—Elzard?” I asked.

In that moment, golden geometric patterns crawled over Dread’s body—and seconds later, the orc man had transformed into a beautiful woman.

Long platinum hair swept the floor, and over her body draped a pure white dress. She was ethereal.

Having revealed herself, she looked upon me and smiled. “I’m glad we could meet again, Ard. You too, Ireena. ...Oh, that girl over there must be... Ginny? And there’s an unfamiliar face, but whatever.” She had on a bright and friendly smile, but murder was written in her eyes.

“...Hey, Ard? Who’s this chick?” Sylphy asked.

“The Frenzied King of Dragons, Elzard. Evil reincarnate, who kidnapped Ireena and put us through a great deal of trouble.”

Five months had passed since that incident. At any rate, she had to be the reason why the half-dragons were helping Asylas. I considered all this.

“...When did you switch places with Dread?” I asked.

“At the Meeting of the Five Powers.”

I see. At the time, I had thought Dread was acting overly vicious toward me, but now I could see why.

“So where’s the real King Dread?”

“Same gimmick as before. Like Jessica, he’s no longer in this world.”

Jessica. Our teacher. Elzard had formerly disguised herself as our instructors. If Dread had passed, that meant...the one person who could stop this war was gone.

“Oh dear,” I said. “I suppose I must take back the severed heads of our

enemies.”

I’d kill every conspirator who planned this war. If I didn’t, this would never end.

“Let me tell you something: It’s not too late,” I continued. “Surrender as King Dread. If you do, I’ll spare your—”

Without warning...a blue magic circle unfolded beneath my feet. This was...something created in the exclusive magic language of the demons.



As soon as I recognized the technique for what it was...

Everything went dark.

...I had screwed up.

Because we couldn't use teleportation or flight, I'd assumed the enemy wouldn't be able to use them either. And it had done me in.

Through some unseen hand, I was teleported outside the castle and found myself on a plain, storm brewing overhead. There wasn't a single stalk of grass across the barren earth.

Devoid of all life since ancient times, this place was called "the Land of Ruin"—and it was where I had once battled with the Evil Gods...

It was also where I had defeated my other self when we went back to the past.

In this fated place...stood that person.

"...I knew it. You're involved in this all along."

A slender body in a tailcoat and sleek black ponytail—an unknown identity, facial features hidden by a clown-like visage.

Mask—a demon with an unknown name, gender, and history. Apparently one of Lars al Ghoul's top brass.

Mask began to speak in their usual theatrics. "We all have a place that suits us best. A dance hall, for a dancer. A stage, for a speaker. A crowded street, for a jester. This is the location for the two of us. The Land of Ruin represents our paths in life. Surely, you agree—"

In the middle of this monologue, I struck Mask with attack spells: Fire. Water. Wind. Lightning. Advanced spells from the five major elements pelted down on us. The maelstrom formed a new crater in the Land of Ruin... but in the midst of it all...Mask continued to stay in place.

"Goodness. I would appreciate it if you listened to my opening remarks. I understand how you must be feeling, but it's been quite a long while since I ___"

I continued to unleash elemental magic like there was no tomorrow, but it did nothing.

...*Oh, this is annoying.* I had to get back to Ireena and the others.

“Do you love your friends that much? I’m jealous, really. Earning your favor is an incredible honor. ...That’s why...”

I could sense a smile behind that mask.

“That’s why I’m getting in your way, my Demon Lord.”

I had no doubt that smile was dripping with malice. *This is so irritating.*

I cast even more spells with the intent of wiping that smirk off that face, but once the dust settled from my violent onslaught... I saw my enemy still standing, looking composed.

“You can’t race back to your friends unless you defeat me. In other words ___”

Mask seemed to be enjoying breaking the horrible news to me.

“—you should assume you’ll never see them again.”

CHAPTER 81

The Ex-Demon Lord's Friends, Plunging to Their Demise

Live on any planet for a decade or two and just about anyone will have a worst nightmare.

Ireena's was right in front of her.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not here to capture you this time. I'm planning to kill you all. I wonder what Ard's face will look like when he finds your mutilated bodies. Can't wait," chirped the beautiful woman with a smile.

Unlike her sweet exterior, her insides were rotten to the core.

The Frenzied King of Dragons, Elzard. A mythical monster, and the legendary dragon who had once brought the world to the brink of destruction. Ireena knew of her power with all her body and soul. Ginny, too.

"...I remember our encounter several months ago. The circumstances were similar."

Ginny had confronted Elzard, just before Ireena was kidnapped. She had cast her magic on the dragon, but it had all been for naught... She'd never felt so powerless before.

For Ireena and Ginny, Elzard was a formidable foe who had changed their lives for the worse.

...Sylphy alone managed to remain calm. She slung her golden Holy Sword over her shoulder.

"If you're called the Frenzied King of Dragons, I guess you must be a part of the dragons. You must've beat a lot of enemies in your day. This oughtta be fun."

Sylphy disappeared. That was how it appeared to Ireena and Ginny anyway.

Her red hair whipping, she closed in on the enemy—

"Raaah!" And she cut diagonally across the shoulder, aiming for Elzard's vital organs with quiet ferocity. Her attack had been so fast, a normal person would have died on the spot.

It was apparently harmless against Elzard, however. She raised her right hand to halt Sylphy's attack. There was a blast. A shock wave rippled through air, sending bits of the throne room's ornamentation flying into the walls.

"...Hmm. This isn't your average sword," Elzard remarked. A red droplet trickled down her right arm that had taken the blow. "I think I remember hearing that Ard has soldiers from ancient times. I couldn't care less, so I almost forgot about that detail... I guess, you're one of 'em, huh?"

"You betcha! I'm the Raging Champion, Sylphy Marheaven! Remember that name when you go to hell!" Sylphy unleashed a whirlwind of attacks. Elzard's eyes widened slightly in surprise as she took in this violent fury.

"I see. It seems you're more than just a kid calling yourself a Champion. A distinct blade and skills to match—I guess you're the real Sylphy Marheaven. I heard all sorts of anecdotes from the last two generations. You charged into our den of dragons all by yourself and slew over a thousand of my kindred. To think I'd get to meet you in person."

Sylphy continued her attacks...which were growing more powerful by the second.

"...Dealing with a Champion and her Holy Sword is going to be annoying. No wonder your name went down in the myths."

Elzard's arms took the hit from Demise-Argis, which tore through her skin. Her recovery spells couldn't keep up. Each time she healed her wounds, deeper lacerations took their place. Blood sprayed. From an outsider's perspective, there was no question that Elzard was on the defense.

Ireena and Ginny were sweating.

"She's always so stupid that I forget, but...!"

"Miss Sylphy is extraordinary...!"

Her sweet features and affable personality made it easy to overlook, but Sylphy Marheaven was the legendary figure known as the "Raging Champion." Like the Demon Lord and Heavenly Kings, she was deified and worshipped across the land. Even though she was an idiot who caused trouble wherever she went...it was easy to see why she was a legend now.

Incredible strength, a larger-than-life personality, battle-experienced from a young age. She was the wielder of the Holy Sword Demise-Argis that once belonged to an Evil God. You couldn't describe her as anything but a hero straight out of myth.

The problem was...her foe was a legend among legends. It was clear even Sylphy didn't have what it took to finish Elzard on her own. Ireena and Ginny looked at one another.

"The least we can do is—!" Ireena started.

"—support Miss Sylphy...!" Ginny finished.

Suppressing their fear, the two nodded to each other and called for the magic equipment Ard had made and gifted to them. Two sets of different items appeared from the other world.

Each had a spear in hand; the tip of Ginny's was crimson, while Ireena's was an azure blue. Matching leg armor snapped on their thighs. Their weapons allowed them to unleash specialized attacks, and their armor kept their physical abilities at a heightened level. With these, they'd be able to hold their own against ancient warriors.

"We're coming, Sylphy!"

"We'll give you an opening! Use that moment to strike!"

The Raging Champion had inspired the two girls. As long as they had Sylphy, everything would work out somehow, even though they felt powerless on their own.

Hope dispelled their fears and equipped them with the courage to fight. And so, Ireena and Ginny wielded their spears and charged forward like heroes.

As Sylphy continued with her stormy barrage, they got in Elzard's way, jabbing at her.

"Uh-oh, here comes trouble," said the dragon, stepping back to put distance between them. Her lips twisted into a smile as she looked at Ireena and Ginny. "Can't say they're as good as this Holy Sword, but those are nice. Did he make them?"

It was three-on-one, yet Elzard was as calm as ever. It was making Ireena worry, but she tried to shake it off.

"You're no match for us!" She took a step forward and delivered a series of blows.

Elzard dodged Ireena like it was nothing, looking at her with an unfazed expression. Ireena's blow could never compare to one of Sylphy's attacks, but she knew that. While Elzard was concentrating on Ireena, Ginny made her move. "*Rise Burst!*"

Ireena jumped back to get out of the way. A giant magic circle appeared

beneath Elzard's feet. Seconds later, white lightning shot through the sky.

"Urgh...?"

Ginny's crimson spear could shoot lightning attacks at will. It numbed an opponent's entire body and brought their movements to a standstill.

"Now, Sylphy!"

"You got it!" Sylphy fiercely closed the distance at just the right moment. Snarling like beast, she charged forward and—

"Hiiiiii-yaaaah!" She swung from the shoulder with a warrior's howl, making contact with Elzard and tearing through her from the left collarbone to the right side of her torso.

"W-we did it!" exclaimed Ireena.

"We defeated the Frenzied King of Dragons all on our own...!" Ginny cried.

They were certain of their victory. Relief washed over them. Their expressions couldn't have looked happier, but...

"...! It's too early to celebrate! We're not out of the woods yet!" Sylphy shouted, placing distance between herself and the enemy as if repelled. Her eyes stared at Elzard, who was losing blood from the gash in her torso.

She did look worse for wear. One more hit, and it'd be as good as done.

But Elzard was smiling—a composed grin of victory. The dragon looked back and forth between Ireena and Ginny.

"Heh-heh. As I thought, people are fast learners. It's only been a few months, but you're totally in sync."

Praised like the backhanded compliment of someone better than you. Ireena thought it was a bluff. She tried to convince herself it was. Ginny did, too.

Elzard is trying to act tough, which is what most people do when they're on the verge of defeat.

"You're definitely improved at magic. Better mental stamina, too. As your former teacher, it warms my heart. So to reward you—"

Ireena and Ginny knew...that their assumption had been but false hope.

"I'll show you what real despair looks like."

Elzard began to morph. The ghastly cut had healed while platinum scales crawled over a section of her skin. Pointed horns sprouted from her temples, and the corners of her mouth split up to her ears. Her teeth and nails sharpened to form fangs and claws.

This half-human, half-dragon form was all too familiar to Ireena and Ginny.

But...this Elzard couldn't even compare to the creature they'd encountered before.

"After Ard humiliated me, I decided to put in some effort for once. If that hadn't happened, I, the world's greatest dragon, would never have gotten the chance to train and hone my skills. Thanks to him, I—"

Elzard's entire body lit up.

All Ireena and Ginny could tell was that she was brilliant, golden. They couldn't understand the threat it posed.

True to her title of "Raging Champion," Sylphy perceived the danger in an instant and cast defensive magic on instinct. A solid wall covered the three girls.

Then...they were in a storm of destruction. Lights pulsed. Something kept pounding into the barrier. The wind howled, rattling their brains and threatening to rupture their eardrums.

"Ngh...! She's nuts...!" Sylphy cried.

The storm raged on for some time...and when all grew still, their surroundings were nothing like before. The audience hall was gone. The entire castle, garden and all, were nowhere to be seen.

The castle, its moat, its walls, its gate...and its people. It was like they had all disappeared into thin air. In its place was a huge crater.

"What *is* this...?!" Ireena murmured in bewilderment as she stood in center.

Elzard glared at her with visible scorn, opening her large maw. "My old self could only tap into my full power in my true form. Not anymore. This body is even better than the other one. And my power is stronger. You know what that means, right, Ireena?"

Ireena's body froze as those golden eyes bore into her. Ginny was still, too. This was making her cower in fear. Even Sylphy wasn't immune. She gripped her sword and quietly muttered.

"Big Sis. Ginny. I'll buy you time. Escape while you can."

She seemed to imply it was the only way. Sylphy sounded pained but determined.

“Escape. Get out of here and run as far away as you can. Meet up with Ard. You’ll be safe with him. He’ll protect you two...!” She took a deep breath. “I’ll show you I’m not the ‘Raging Champion’ for nothing!”

Sylphy bravely charged at Elzard with neither hesitation nor fear. She was going to sacrifice herself for her friends. She’d made up her mind.

“Good luck with that.” Elzard didn’t budge.

Even as Sylphy closed in and swung her sword overhead, the dragon didn’t move a muscle. The sharp blade was about to make direct contact with the top of Elzard’s head, but...

It sounded like metal clanging.

“Gwagh...!” Sylphy’s sword bounced right off. She stared at her tingling hand and grit her teeth. “I have more where that came from!”

Her next hits were all to the same effect—repelled without making so much as a scratch on Elzard. But Sylphy persisted, brandishing her Holy Sword. After all, it was all meant to buy time...for the other two to escape.

Even though they knew that, Ireena and Ginny couldn’t move. Terror had turned their bodies to stone. Their minds had gone blank. They couldn’t even process a single thought.

Elzard smiled at Ireena. “I promise to kill you last, Ireena. But first—”

She moved her right hand, palm facing Sylphy, who continued her barrage.

“Do you want to watch a dragon kill a Champion?” Elzard asked with a repulsive smile.

A beam of light shot from her hand, engulfing Sylphy’s petite body. Ginny and Ireena found her collapsed on the ground in the distance. Smoke rose from her burnt form.

Ireena was wrestling with two emotions: overwhelming fear and...rage upon seeing her friend injured. Even though she was petrified of Elzard’s powers, Ireena was only thinking of one thing: *Revenge*.

Volcanic fury fired up her will to fight.

Ginny placed a hand on her shoulder. “I feel terrible for Miss Sylphy, but I’m afraid we must ignore her orders.”

Ginny seemed to feel the same way.

They knew running away would be their best option, but the monster

before them wouldn't allow it. And so, they had no choice but to stand and fight.

"Girls have iron wills, too. Don't we, Miss Ireena?"

"Yeah, that's right...!"

Point to one girl who wouldn't land a good punch on someone who hurt her friend. It would go against girl code.

"Heh-heh. You haven't changed," Elzard said. "You'd rather get revenge for your fallen friend than run from danger. ...That really pisses me off."

Elzard found the concept of friendship detestable and couldn't stand them. Her voice was spiked with irritation.

"Let's go, Ginny...!"

"Ready when you are, Miss Ireena...!"

Their eyes glinted in determination. Spears at the ready, they stepped forth—daring, brave. Closing the distance between them and Elzard, they went on the offensive, hacking and trying to rip through her with the help of attack magic.

"You two make a great team. Call it the power of friendship. I gotta say, I'm touched. But...it won't work on me."

Their dual onslaught was a valiant effort, but it had no effect on Elzard. The tips of their spears bounced off her steel-like skin, and even their fire and ice spells had no influence.

But they didn't give up. As long as they had the will to carry on, they knew there would be a chance. Ever since they'd met Ard, their lives had been anything but ordinary. They'd faced beings greater than themselves and found themselves in more than a few scary situations. But they had survived every time. And here they were now.

They seemed to believe they would make it if they didn't give up.

—Elzard smiled at their line of thinking. It was scornful, utterly so.

"You might have scraped by with the power of friendship. You think you can do it again." She was grinning on the receiving end of their attacks. Her eyes flashed with bloodlust. "I'll teach you that only fools believe friendship can work miracles."

An instant later, Elzard launched her counterattack. She hadn't retaliated up until that point, but the dragon took Ireena's weapon...and crushed it into dust.

"Wha...?!" Ireena's eyes snapped open.

Elzard coolly called out, “Let the tragedy begin.” Her mouth twisted into a menacing smile.

Elzard pulverized the spear Ginny threw at her. “You should see this one’s death up close.” She unleashed a spear-hand strike—four fingers extended and compressed together; sharp talons connected with Ginny’s solar plexus, piercing her stomach and organs.

“Gah...?!” Ginny’s eyes widened with excruciating pain. The light in them was fading.

She was moments away from death.

“Giiiiiiiiinny!” Ireena cried out as if to stop her from losing consciousness.

Elzard seemed satisfied by the scream of despair. “You should be more worried about yourself.” She thrust her one hand at Ireena as the corners of her mouth turned upward.

I’m going to die. That spurred Ireena into action, and she cast defense magic on complete reflex. A glittering wall enveloped her...as a golden flash exploded from Elzard’s palm.

A crash. Agonizing pain. Weightlessness.

Bright light flooded her vision, and her consciousness went dark.

How much time had passed? She could feel a cold, hard sensation on her cheek.

Ireena opened her eyes and realized she was lying in the town. The defensive spell had saved her life...but her body had taken major damage.

“Argh...!” The pain brought tears to her eyes as she slowly stood up. The citizens stared at her in confusion.

“Did this girl come flying from the castle?”

“I wonder if she’s got something to do with it disappearing?”

Their battle with Elzard had apparently worried the public. Ireena felt bad for them as she managed to get back on her own two feet.

“Ha-ha. You’re a stubborn one, Ireena,” Elzard said, mirthfully swooping down from the heavens.

The sight of the half-dragon made the public panic even more.

“Wh-what is that monster...?!”

“D-disgusting...!”

They looked at her with fear and animosity. She scowled.

“...Quit staring, you worms,” Elzard snarled, raising her right hand upward.

Ireena immediately realized what she had in mind and cried out, “Sto—”

Elzard acted before she could finish, and magic circles flashed in the sky. Golden geometric patterns spread in the empty space, radiant and terrifying.

That would be the last sight they ever saw.

“Drop dead,” Elzard spat, letting fire shoot from the magic circles.

Destruction descended upon the town and...delivered hellfire. The heat reduced people and buildings to ashes. Since structures were made of wood, the flames were starting to spread. Elzard’s spell was turning even distant locations into scenes of tragedy.

“How could you...?!” Ireena asked. She was safe since she wasn’t the target of this attack.

Her eyes saw hell. Up in flames, the picturesque town was gone. Its populace had died violent deaths: charred corpses unrecognizable, a young girl with ashes for legs, men blown to pieces by the impact. Hours before, they had been living life—laughing and crying with one another.

Ireena thought her heart might break.

And she felt hatred—all-consuming hatred—for the monster responsible for this.

“Why...?! Why are you doing this?! They had nothing to do with you!”

Elzard smirked. “Yeah, they had nothing to do with me. That’s why I could kill them. It’s easy to take a life when they don’t matter to you. I’ve always hated humans, so I’m pretty sure I’d kill them, regardless.” Arms wide, Elzard gestured to the blazing town, grin deepening. “After I kill you and send Ard into the depths of despair, I’m thinking about killing everyone in the country. I’ve only been king since becoming Dread Ben Hurr, but wow, controlling humans is pretty stressful. As payback, I’m going to give all the good citizens the cruelest deaths imaginable.”

Elzard wasn’t kidding. Ireena grit her teeth. “Never...! You think I’ll let you get away with that...?!”

To Ireena, the people of Asylas were the enemy. But that didn’t matter.

Lives—all of them—were precious. This had been hammered into her during the events of Megatholium.

Maybe humans were all ugly and pathetic. But within that contamination lay a small glimmer. To protect it...she would risk her life and defeat the evil that stood before her.

Ireena glared at her foe.

Elzard shrugged. “You seem convinced you can take me down, but you might as well forget it. Take another good look at the situation.” Elzard scanned Ireena from head to toe. “Your weapon’s become dust; your leg armor has seen better days. You’ve got bone fractures, and even your organs have suffered major damage. Don’t you just wanna cry? No need to act tough. Go ahead and let it out: ‘Arrrd, help meee!’ He’ll coming running like he always does,” she mocked.

Ireena would never. “I’m not the person I was when you kidnapped me...!”

She’d been weak then—a damsel in distress waiting to be saved by the hero.

“I’m not just some princess in need of protecting anymore...!”

Ireena was competitive by birth. And above all else, she dreamed of becoming a champion.

She was thinking of two people. The first was her friend and the world’s strongest hero, Ard Meteor. Only a short while earlier, Ireena had told him she wanted to become strong to become special to him, but that wasn’t the entire story.

Before, she had wanted to *be* Ard. She wanted to be someone with absolute power who could protect everyone. She’d been influenced by Ard and the one who had been his equal...the legendary Champion she’d met in the past, Lydia. She was Ireena’s ideal self. She lived wild and free, chuckled heartily, and saved those in need with a gallant flair.

Ard and Lydia. Ireena wanted to be on their level. Not some feeble girl who wailed at the slightest sense of danger. In fact...she wanted to protect those in tears.

“You know as well as I do...! Ard won’t come to my rescue...! I’m sure of it...! He isn’t some hero that’ll rush in as soon as I start screaming...!” Ireena had regained her purpose. She hammered it into her enemy. “If a hero isn’t going to rescue me...I’ll be my own hero!”

She would turn her bravery into power.

“I’m gonna take you down! I won’t let you hurt anyone else!”

At that very moment, she mustered up her strength to defeat evil for the sake of others...

If he was right, *that sword* was going to accept her. Ireena shot her left hand skyward.

“Come! Vald-Galgulus!”

The air rumbled, and something flashed in the empty space around them.

Something powerful was incoming, Ireena thought, when a blade appeared in her hand.

Devoid of extra ornamentation and shining pure white, this silver blade was the beloved weapon of the former Champion Lydia and one of the three great Holy Swords. It could slay evil with the power of heart.

Vald-Galgulus.

“Oh? Is that your secret weapon?”

Ireena gripped its hilt, assuming a battle stance. Elzard looked at her with a sneer. *What do you think you can do with that crappy thing?* she seemed to taunt.

Staring down her enemy, Ireena thought back to when Ard had entrusted her with the sword. It was back during the school festival, right after they’d stopped Sylphy from going wild and wrested her from the enemy’s control. Once Vald-Galgulus was resealed into the large tree at the Academy, and Ard and Ireena were alone together, he had told her something.

“Someday, Ireena, there will be difficult situations that require you to risk your life. To ensure you’re ready when that time comes...I’ll entrust you with a Holy Sword. When I resealed it within the tree, I added a condition that will allow you to summon it at any time.”

Ireena was shocked. *“Do you think I’ll be able to wield it?”*

He nodded without hesitation. *“Yes. In fact, this sword is a good fit for you. Vald-Galgulus eats at the heart of its wielder. It’s a dangerous weapon. Even the most holy of saints have ended up following the path of evil. It’s a*

wicked sword that is holy only in name. But...I know you can master it. I'm certain its power will not take hold of your heart."

With a confident smile, Ard placed a hand on Ireena's shoulder.

"The Champion Lydia was the same way. You have all the makings of a hero. As someone who goes above and beyond when fighting for the sake of others, it's only right that you brandish it."

Ard had believed in her, believed she could master the sword's power, believed she would use that power for good. And she had respected that trust by calling upon the blade's name. To protect those in need. To transform despair into hope.

"Arstella. Glisten, O Soul! Fotoblis. Become my Light... Tenneblicke. And Dispel from Darkness!"

The chant, almost as old as time itself, left Ireena's lips. A brilliant light wrapped around her body, and a few moments later—she was wearing armor made of white silver.

"Nnngh...!" All her pain seemed to evaporate...but a powerful force washed over her, and wicked passions flooded into her: Hatred for her enemy. An impulse to destroy things. Bloodlust. A compulsion to violate someone.

The Holy Sword was infiltrating the heart of its master and attempting to make her venal.

However—

"I'll use this power for good!" She dispelled the evil in her heart and rushed toward the enemy.

As the girl barreled toward her, Elzard smiled contemptuously. "Ha-ha, aren't you a brave one? Nothing more than a pointless strug—"

Ireena got within range and swung her Holy Sword—a diagonal cut that began from the shoulder and carried her full force. It hit Elzard's unshakeable body.

It won't do anything. A weak little girl can't take me down, Elzard thought, smiling.

Seconds later, the Frenzied King of Dragons was stunned by a revelation.

As Ireena's attack made contact with Elzard's body, the silver blade ripped through skin and sliced through her very bones.

"Gah?!" The dragon's eyes grew wide at the blinding pain.

"Take this!" Another swing, this time in the opposite direction. It sliced

through Elzard as cleanly as the first, marking an *X* on her abdomen.

“Gah...?! Y-you gotta be joking...! There’s no way you could hit me now that I’m at full power...!” Coughing up blood, Elzard stumbled forward. Her regenerative properties were immediately activated to heal her wounds.

Even so, the dragon was rattled. As she withdrew in a cold sweat, Ireena boldly stepped forward. “Raaaaaaaah!”

Crouching low to the ground, the girl sprang at her like a wild beast going after its prey. It made Elzard fly into a rage.

“Don’t push your luck, little girl!” Magic circles appeared over Elzard’s head. “Disappear!”

On her command, they unleashed beams of azure light, forming an enormous mass of blazing heat, but this failed to stop Ireena, who continued to race forward.

“*Cell Vidiias. Become a Source of Fear!*” She cast one of Vald-Galgulus’s spells. The silvery blade began to shine brightly, and then it absorbed Elzard’s heat beams.

“What?!” Shock settled back on the face of the Frenzied King of Dragons.

Before her, Ireena was quickly closing in. She was accelerating, perhaps from absorbing Elzard’s powers. Vald-Galgulus had taken the attack and converted it into power to feed its master. Elzard’s attempt to murder Ireena had strengthened her.

“Haaah!” A blow came from overhead.

Clicking her tongue, Elzard jumped back to avoid it. “This power...! It didn’t just come from the sword...!”

Elzard had instinctively sensed a hidden energy emanating from within Ireena. She was converting courage into strength and dispersing it into every cell of her body. It enveloped her like an aura, pure and white...

Elzard finally figured out her true form. “You...demons! So I was just a stepping-stone, huh...?! ”

The power of the Evil Gods was awakening within Ireena. Her body and soul were connected to her ancestral roots. The being named Ireena was drawing near those dark forces—ever closer to a colossal presence that could produce power and change the world. Elzard had just witnessed an innocent girl turn into a monster.

That had been the demons’ plan all along. Their goal was to awaken Ireena. And they had used Elzard as a pawn to accomplish this objective.

This realization made her furious. “How dare you manipulate me, you worthless insects!”

As Ireena charged in, Elzard summoned her own blade. Like one that had belonged to her half-dragon underling, it was a large sword made primarily of dragon bone. Pointing its tip at Ireena, she launched herself off the ground.

As the town burned around them...a girl and a dragon had begun to swordfight.

“Ragh!”

“Hah!”

The Holy Sword and dragon blade slammed into each other, shooting sparks on impact. Each impact was followed by a thunderous echo and shock wave, obliterating the paved roads in seconds. It was, by all accounts, a fight far beyond the realm of humankind.

For some time, they were matched one-to-one...but the stalemate began to break.

And the more dominant of the two was... Elzard, the Frenzied King of Dragons.

“Ha-ha! What’s wrong, Ireena?! Not moving around so fast now, are ya?!”

The dragon sword grazed Ireena’s cheek. Since it was forged mostly with dragon bone, even the slightest scratch could eat away at an opponent’s soul. It had no power over her, however, as Ireena was now on par with the Evil Gods.

But if the sword managed to cut deeper...it would mean instant death for anyone. That moment was coming closer...

Elzard wasn’t the only one who could sense this. Ireena did, too.

My body is so heavy...! My heart hurts...!

Ireena was struggling. Handling the awakening of her powers and the Holy Sword was no easy task. Any average person would have fallen to their knees and collapsed from fatigue. She had long since reached her limit. Ireena was beginning to resign herself to her fate.

Is this where it ends...? Am I just a weak little princess...? Ow... I wish I could give up and go to sleep...

Even the greatest can only go so far. Who could blame a mortal for complaining upon being pushed far beyond her breaking point? She had fought admirably to protect others, went past her limits, and drove a

terrifying monster into a corner.

...Haven't I done enough? I'll leave the rest to Ard. Even if I don't stand a chance against her, I'm sure he'll think of something, she thought.

“Stand strong, Miss Ireena!”

A familiar voice cut through the clanging swords.

“Ginny...!”

Off in the distance, in the shadows of a crumbled building...was her friend, face pale, glaring at Ireena.

“I bet you were thinking you'd leave this to Ard! I bet you thought you couldn't beat her! Well, you're wrong, Miss Ireena! You would never lose to some silly dragon!”

Ginny's voice seemed to grip Ireena's heart.

“You're just as heroic as Ard! Don't you remember?! The first person to call out to me, to reach out and save me, wasn't Ard! It was *you*, Miss Ireena!” Ghostly white, Ginny cried out with tears in her eyes to her beloved hero. “I've always watched you from behind! I tried hard to stand by your side! Miss Ireena, you're my dear friend *and* my inspiration! That's why there is no way you'll ever lose to some dragon!”

Something was burning in Ireena's heart. Flames of friendship.

“Win, Miss Ireena! Take down that lizard woman and show me you're a hero worthy of fighting by Ard Meteor's side!” Tears streaked down Ginny's face, and Elzard's bloodshot eyes bore into her.

“Quit yapping, you stupid girl!” the dragon snapped with a look of fury.

Magic circles appeared before her, and blue beams of light rushed down on Ginny. Already severely injured, the girl didn't have the strength to dodge.

I'll protect my friend.

“*Cell Vidiyas. Become a Source of Fear!*” Ireena raced toward her friend and called upon the power of her Holy Sword again. The blue beams were absorbed into its silvery white blade. She stood in front of Ginny and offered a smile. “Just watch, Ginny! I'll beat this thing in no time!”



Ireena carried out her attack.

“Tch! No point in struggling, girl!” Elzard’s breath was ragged. Maybe Ireena’s awakened power had sparked fear in her. Or...their show of friendship had set her off.

“There’s no way I’m gonna lose now!” Ireena cried, swinging her holy blade, fueled by passion. She wasn’t just recovered; she was stronger than before.

“Hah...! You think you’re showing me the power of friendship...?! Don’t be an idiot!” Elzard seemed angrier, exploding in fury as she wielded the sword made of dragon bone.

“Inspiration?! Heroes?! Friends?! Who cares?! You’ll always be betrayed in the end! All that shit does is get in the way!” Elzard spat and swung her blade, getting more intense.

Ireena could feel the sadness in the dragon’s heart.

“Humans and monsters don’t mix! They can never be friends! Aaaaah! You make me so sick!”

It seemed Elzard was pushing her limits, fueled by rage, hatred, jealousy. ...Ireena was continuing to exceed her own physical boundaries.

“Monster or not, we can understand one another if we join hands! You can be like me and Ginny! People aren’t as horrible as you think!”

Ow. My body. My heart. They’re burning up.

“Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Hiiiiii-yaaaah!”

I might be inferior, but I’m not giving up. My friend is watching. My friend who said I was dear to her. My friend who called me a hero. I don’t want to embarrass myself in front of her. I want to be a hero until the very end.

“I’m going to win, Elzaaaaard!” Ireena broke through another one of her mental blocks.

Her bursting emotions, purpose, courage...it all took her to the next level. It was like these emotions were flooding out of the depths of her being. Her aura had darkened from stark white to the deepest black...

“Ngh...!” Pain racked her entire body. Joints and bones creaked, veins burst, blood sprayed.

“Hah! You’re losing control! The power of the Evil Gods is too much for one person to handle! At this rate, you’ll be killed by your own stren—”

“*So what?!*” Ireena shrieked. Even as the dark aura draped around her and blood burst, she kept the pain at bay, still trying to rip through Elzard. “I don’t care if my body falls to pieces! I’m going to beat you! I’m going to win! I *will* win!”

Even as every inch of her body screamed, straining to keep up, and she wept from pain, Ireena didn’t stop. It forced Elzard to go on the defensive; there wasn’t even room for a counterattack. The dragon-bone blade caught the blows of Ireena’s Holy Sword...and Elzard grimaced under the impact.

“Ngh...! I won’t accept it...! Never...! No way in heeeell!” Elzard meant every word, but it didn’t change the situation.

Finally, a crack ran through the bone sword and traveled through the rest of the blade.

“It’s impossible for me to lose to a little shit! There’s no way that would ever happen!” She cried for victory, but her hopes were dashed. Ireena’s next blow brought the bone sword to its limit, and—the sword fractured into a million pieces.

“You’re done, Elzard!”

...Then came judgment. Ireena formed her right hand into a tight fist and put every ounce of energy she had into it.

“Daaaamn it!” Elzard shrieked.

As Ireena moved in on her, Elzard aimed a spear-hand strike straight for her throat—fast and sharp. But it moved at a snail’s pace to Ireena. She dodged it and drew ever closer.

“Clench your jaw, dummy!”

The iron fist struck Elzard in the face and felt like an explosion had gone off. The dense concentration of power had created an unbelievable impact. Then, Elzard went soaring across town. She crashed through buildings that fell like dominos, and even kept going until she pierced the wall protecting the town. Elzard landed outside its borders and onto the smooth plain as if expelled from the dwelling of humans. Her body rolled across the ground and finally came to a stop.

Stretched out like a snow angel, Elzard glared up at the sun. “D-damn it...! How did this...?!”

She couldn’t continue the battle. Neither her mind nor body had any fight left in them. Cursing her defeat was her last option.

Ireena walked over to her, Holy Sword in hand.

“...Kill me,” the Frenzied King of Dragons barked at the girl who stood looking down on her. She wanted a swift end: to die so she could leave this disgusting world behind.

...But Ireena refused to grant her wish.

“I’m not going to kill you. You’re going to keep on living.” Ireena fixed an inscrutable look on her.

Elzard smiled dryly. “What are you gonna do, keep me as a pet? Slowly torture me for years to come? Ha-ha, spoken like a descendent of the Evil Gods.” There was a smile on her lips, but she had eyes full of malice. “If you’re not going to kill me, I’ll do the job myself. I don’t want to spend another second in this blasted world.” Elzard began to cast a special spell that would destroy her own body.

“You think I’d let you?” Ireena bent down and touched Elzard’s chest. An instant later, her magic circles winked out of sight.

“What did you do...?!” Elzard’s eyes snapped open, failing to hide her surprise.

Ireena answered honestly. “I don’t know. I just figured maybe I could do something and gave it a try.”

Ireena couldn’t possibly understand the extent of her powers. She only had a vague outline of her abilities. She’d awakened the blood of the Evil Gods that she had inherited, which meant she had gained the ability to change reality on a small scale. And she had just used it to block Elzard’s actions.

The girl seemed astonished by her own power.

“...I’m really not a normal person anymore, am I?”

She was now on par with the Outer Ones...known as the “Evil Gods” in modern times.

Her eyes were empty when she realized this. On the other hand, Elzard was glaring at her with killer intent, gritting her teeth.

“Enough messing around...! Kill me! Do it now!” she screamed.

Ireena shook her head. “I’m not going to kill you, and I won’t let you die. But it’s not what you think... I’m not trying to make you suffer. In fact, it’s the exact opposite.”

Still crouched low, Ireena peered into Elzard’s eyes. “When you kidnapped me a few months ago, I could do nothing except scream and cry. I didn’t understand you at all. But...now that we’ve fought, I’ve realized something. Ard and I could have reached the same path in life as you.”

She continued to stare into the dragon's golden eyes. "Ard and I were able to make wonderful friends. But...you're different, Elzard. You weren't lucky enough to meet people who could accept you're a monster. ...If everyone hadn't been there for me in Megatholium, I would have ended up the same way."

At the climax of the latest incident, Ireena had lost faith in humanity and thought she would never be happy. Lizer had leaked the truth about Ireena and the existence of the Evil Gods' descendants to the entire continent.

During her time in Megatholium, Ireena had stared into the darkness of humanity... As a result, she had come to the conclusion that people and monsters could never understand one another. She'd thought her identity would cause all her relationships to come crashing down.

But what happened? ...Far from rejecting her, everyone had come running to Megatholium. It wasn't just Ginny and Sylphy, either. All her acquaintances had rushed to her aid. Ireena was ashamed of how little faith she'd had in humanity, and she grew to love people more than ever before. However...

"You've been betrayed. That's all you've ever known. That's why you're acting this way."

Elzard was a reflection of her and Ard. And so, she held out her hand.

"I don't think you're pure evil. That's why I'm not going to kill you. I don't hate you either. In fact...I think we can join hands."

Ireena looked straight into Elzard's eyes and made her proclamation.

"I won't betray you. Ever. So...I want you to try believing in people once more. Live among them with us, Elzard."

This Frenzied King of Dragons had hurt many people. Ireena knew that was unforgivable, but...she and Ard could do their best to make amends with those Elzard had injured. She could become someone who no longer had a bad relationship with humanity. Ireena wanted to believe there was some good in her. And so...

"Starting today, you're going to be my friend, Elzard," she announced with a gentle smile.

Elzard's eyes grew round, but they soon shifted to daggers. "...You're out of your damn mind. You thought you'd become like me? Hah, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. You're wrong. About everything. I've hated humans and every other race since I was born. No reason, really. That means

I hate you, too. Be friends with you? I'd rather fight again and kill all your friends right before you," the dragon replied, letting out a long stream of cruel words.

To Ireena, Elzard looked like a child throwing a tantrum.

"Now that we're at the same level, I can understand you better. I used to think you were some monster, but it seems you were just an attention hog."

"...Huh?" Elzard frowned.

Their hearts weren't one yet, but Ireena had hope that she'd smile with this scary dragon. She thought of the many developments that awaited them in this life, and her mood brightened.

A magic circle suddenly appeared beneath Ireena's feet.

It wasn't Elzard's doing. She was just as shocked at the sudden development.

Moments later, Ireena's consciousness went dark—

When she came to, she was standing in an unfamiliar place. The sky was heavy with stormy clouds, and thunder continued to rumble. The earth was desolate.

This must be what the end of the world looks like, she thought.

In these ruins... Ireena spotted two men.

Ard Meteor. He looked different, though, maybe because he'd activated his *Original* technique. Ireena felt like she might faint from his beauty alone.

And—the other man was familiar, too. But why? Why was he here?

Just as she was considering this, he flashed a charming yet brutal smile. "Wonderful! Ah, that was magnificent, *Fräulein*! You've evolved so much!"

As his insane delight manifested itself, a small box appeared in his hand.

As soon as she laid eyes on the pure white object with gold lines, Ireena felt nostalgic and...overcome with indescribable fear.

It should not be allowed to exist. It had to be destroyed.

Otherwise... Everything would come crashing down, including her hopes and future.

She instinctively took on a fighting stance. However...

“It’s useless, *Fräulein*! Now that you’re an Evil God—you have no choice but to become the Holy Grail that will fulfill my desires!”

As if to prove this, strength was sapped from Ireena’s body.

Her soul and its infinite energy dissolved into a sparkling stream that flowed into the white box.

“Ireena!”

Ireena saw Ard’s flustered face...and her vision went black.

CHAPTER 82

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Beginning of the End

The sooner I finished this battle, the better. The more time that passed, the more loose ends I'd have to tie. Such was the nature of war. I walked into the fight with the intent of ending it immediately.

Plus, I knew my friends were in serious danger. I couldn't afford to hold back.

As the battle between us commenced, I cast my *Original* technique and switched right to Phase III. This put me at the greatest possible advantage. I drove Mask into a corner, then—

“Gwah?!”

I pierced my dark blade straight through the heart. Normally, it'd be a done deal by this point.

“Heh. Heh-heh. I expected no less. You're wonderful, my Demon Lord.” That hit should have taken my enemy out, Mask was alive and well. They raised their palm toward my face.

Sensing danger, I drew my sword from their chest and moved back. I glared at my enemy as I put distance between us. ...That marked the third time. I'd already delivered three fatal blows. And I wasn't going easy on Mask or anything.

They'd all been merciless attacks meant to completely eradicate their astral body. But it seemed like my enemy had barely felt them. In fact, Mask grew more elated with every attack.

...No one with immortality was supposed to exist in this era. They had to be from the past. Not only that, I was pretty sure this was someone close to me.

I had a number of reasons for thinking this. At the top of the list was—

“*Hell's Gate. Open.*”

“Oh, that's not good.”

They knew my battle techniques. This served as my number one clue.

The basic technique in magic wars was to cast as many spells as possible to catch your opponent off guard and strike them when they least expect it. Like chess, magic battles were all about predicting your opponent's moves. Those who possessed the most unknown spells had a powerful advantage.

Put another way...knowing all your opponent's moves put *you* at a great advantage.

The masked figure seemed to know pretty much everything I had up my sleeve. When I compiled that with his weird inability to die...I was able to narrow my options down to a few people. They would all be difficult to handle. I sighed when I thought of a particular man.

"You seem to be growing impatient, my Demon Lord. I am, too. Although I would enjoy facing each other full force, we're still in the prebattle stage, so I'm afraid I cannot act as I wish. Oh! Woe is me!" cried out the masked figure dramatically, gesticulating wildly.

That behavior. These speech patterns. I'd had a vague inkling the first time we met but...I knew it. It was *him*.

If I was right, even Phase III wouldn't be enough to finish him off. If I wanted to take him down, I'd have to switch to my fourth form: Final Phase.

Even if I could defeat him, I'd end up completely incapacitated afterward if I deployed it. Back when I was Varvatos, my body could handle it just fine, but on my average body, it would take too much of a toll. If I couldn't get back to my friends and defeat Elzard, what would be the point in taking out this enemy here?

...There was no need to beat him. Immobilizing him for just a few seconds would be enough. A victory here wouldn't help us win. I had to meet back up with my friends.

If I could stop him for just two or three seconds, I could make my way back to them with warp magic. If Mask was who I thought he was...my best option was to take *my* detailed knowledge of all *his* moves. I quickly formulated a battle plan and put it into action.

"*Glisten. O Light and Might of Heaven.*" I chanted a two-verse spell to throw him off, beams of light raining down from the sky.

Mask had no difficulty handling this spell from ancient times. I had made it to take down armies of men, but he didn't even try to block them. Taking direct hits, he charged right at me as his body was riddled with holes. He raced forward, even as the light rammed into him.

Only his powers of immortality kept him alive. Even if his body was ripped apart or full of holes, he knew his wounds would be healed in an instant. This spell meant to take down entire enemy forces had no effect on him.

That was fine. After all, it was just part of my plan to get him to misidentify my magic.

“Fasten. O Chains of Paradise,” I chanted. Magic circles appeared to both sides of Mask. Chains snapped out to bind him, but—

“Ha-ha! So you’re going with your favorite sealing technique!”

He’d read me again. The masked figure took a big step back and dodged the tangle of incoming chains. Originally, I’d planned to bind him with those chains and use a six-verse chant to seal him away in an eternal prison. He had apparently figured out this out.

Even so, that was exactly why he would fall for my trap.

I intentionally stopped the light beams and pretended to make another move. This seemed to send his mind in yet another direction.

As the masked figure jumped backward through the air...something was waiting for him.

“Consume. Eternity Snake.” A short two-verse incantation.

Mask soared through the air, and as I chanted—he landed at the exact moment that I was waiting for.

A small black dot rose before him.

“This is—” He sounded shocked, but he never got to finish what he was saying. The black dot instantly inflated and swallowed up his entire body.

The dark orb was a sort of “gravity prison” so to speak, and the victim is locked away under its crushing weight. I’d only developed it after my reincarnation into modern times, so I figured even a foe like him couldn’t possibly know how to deal with such a new spell, but...it seemed it would only buy me the few seconds I’d been hoping for.

I’ve got to use this chance to teleport back to Ireena and the others—

“Doing so is futile.”

I heard the voice of a familiar girl. I felt a murderous aura behind me and jumped to the side. A second later...a beam of light blasted through the place I had just been standing.

I took this sight in and glared at the new intruder.

“...I had planned on finishing this up early to avoid any surprises, but I

subordinates.

Alvarto Egzex. A former Heavenly King and my army's greatest weapon.



* * *

...Smiling as if in a trance, he looked at me. “How long I’ve been waiting to meet up with you! It has been three thousand nine hundred years, two months, and three days since you so cruelly broke our promise. For all that time, I continued to wait. Ah, it was like my personal hell to wait for you, my Lord. A world without you is a living nightmare.” Tears pooled in Alvarto’s eyes and fell to the ground.

This was no act. He was that happy to see me again.

...Like the other Heavenly Kings, Alvarto hadn’t changed at all these past few thousand years. He was as bound by his twisted love for me as ever.

“Long ago, you defeated me and said this as you stared down in contempt: ‘I’ll kill you when my ideal future has been realized.’ I surrendered to your army because I, too, wanted you to be my death bringer. Yet *this* is the thanks I get. You have no idea how much it hurts to have suffered thousands of years in vain.”

His teary eyes now flashed with fury. “I prepared while awaiting your reincarnation. I made great efforts in both mind and body to create a scenario that combined two things: a method of pestering you and a most supreme battle.”

Alvarto looked up at the sky with distant eyes as if reminiscing over the last thousand years. “My first thought was that I would need an army of laborers if I hoped to attain my most cherished desire, so I gathered my demons and established Lars al Ghou. By falsely telling them that we would revive the Evil Gods, I was able to make them obedient.”

I’d assumed that Mask/Alvarto was one of the important people in that organization, but to think he was actually their leader...

...So this guy was a pure-blooded demon and someone who held authority among the Evil Gods this entire time. Even after he betrayed them, there had to have been plenty of demons who still worshipped him. Establishing the organization must have an easy task.

I feel sorry for those he’d tricked.

“After establishing the organization and watching it blossom in the blink of an eye, I started to mobilize my workers. They’ve been hard at work, collecting information for me since the old days. First, I had them investigate

people who might be your reincarnated self. Second...I had them look for a prop that would make you suffer and call for a battle like no other. Those efforts have proved to be worthwhile, since I now have all the materials I need.”

Alvarto looked at me once again. There were no longer tears in his eyes; now, only delight and madness. A wicked smile appeared on his face, and he shouted the unforgivable.

“The appearance of my sidekick, Kalmia, can only mean one thing! The last and most important ingredient—*Fräulein* Ireena’s transformation to become an Evil God—is complete!”

Ireena’s transformation to become an Evil God...?! My eyes grew wide, and Alvarto’s smile deepened. He cast a single spell: warp magic.

A magic circle manifested right next to him...and summoned a single girl. Someone more important to me than life itself. A friend in this era like no other.

Ireena.

...She must have just fought with Elzard. Vald-Galgulus was in her hand. She was covered in blood. Her clothes were little more than rags. Ireena looked between me and Alvarto.

The sight of her unsettled me.

By all appearances, she was no different than usual. She seemed mentally fit.

However...her soul had transformed into something else entirely.

Until just a short while before, her soul had been mortal, though it was unique in a way, because she was a descendent of the Evil Gods. But now, it was shifting into one of these dark forces.

...I finally understood. Since the day Ireena and I first met...the enemy had been with us every step of the way. Everything we’d gone through had all been Alvarto’s doing...and his goal had been Ireena activating her true powers.

And why would he do that? Because by changing Ireena into the equivalent of an Evil God, he could drive me into a mental corner.

“Wonderful! Ah, that was magnificent, *Fräulein*! You’ve evolved so much!”

The corners of Alvarto’s mouth twisted upward as passion filled his eyes. An instant later... A small box appeared in his hand. Gold lines snaked

across its pure white surface. Anyone would agree it was beautiful, but my eyes saw something ominous.

Ireena seemed to feel the same way. Her entire body jolted when she gazed upon it, and she stood on guard. At the same time, her eyes seemed steely, determined. *Destroy the box*, she seemed to say.

I was of the same opinion. That thing can't exist. We both took on a defensive stance.

"It's useless, *Fräulein*! Now that you're fully an Evil God—you have no choice but to become the Holy Grail that will fulfill my desires!"

Before I had a chance to make my move, Alvarto had already accomplished what he needed.

"Aaah...?!"

As Ireena stared in wonder, beams burst from her body. The white box in Alvarto's hand absorbed them... The light left Ireena's eyes, and she began to fall to the ground.

"Ireena!" Before I could rush over and catch her in my arms, Alvarto used warp magic to draw her to him.

"That won't do, my Demon Lord. This girl is a precious one. It would ruin things if you touched her now," Alvarto said with a sweet smile.

I directed my unbridled rage at him. "You cretin...! What did you do to my friend?!"

My anger made the air vibrate and earth crack. Even as natural disasters erupted in tandem, Alvarto never lost his grin.

"Her life is in no danger. It's a single component, one that will make this Strange Cube operational and maintain its effects. That is what *Fräulein* Ireena in her current form is for. Furthermore—" Alvarto raised the box to the heavens as he shouted. "The time to fulfill my greatest wish has finally come!"

The white box began to shift around as if disassembling itself.

This is bad. I don't really get what's going on, but that thing is trouble. I have to destroy it fast. I tried to spring into action, but...I couldn't lift a finger. I couldn't cast magic either. I had no choice but to listen to Alvarto and watch him carry out his grand plan.

"It's time to start the endgame! If you wish to overcome the worst of circumstances and take back your dear friend, then come to me! To the one who has become the true Demon Lord!"

The white box soon transformed into a spiral—and the golden shine that radiated from it clouded my vision. That was the last thing I saw in Asylas. As my consciousness faded, I grit my teeth and mentally screamed the name of my dear friend.

Ireena.

Her face flashed in my mind...and immediately, my vision went dark—

PRELUDE TO THE FINALE

A World, Transformed

In her endless sea of consciousness, Sylphy heard a voice.

“Miss...—fy...! Drink...this...!”

The words were fragmented. By the voice’s tone, Sylphy could tell it was her friend. Ginny must have been trying to save her. Was the thing being poured into her mouth the potion Ard had supplied them before the battle?

Sylphy managed to hold onto her consciousness as she gulped down the liquid. When she did, the injuries from her battle with the Frenzied King of Dragons healed in an instant. The paralyzing pain had disappeared, and she no longer felt on the verge of fainting.

Ard’s potions always work like a charm. But...it seems like even he couldn’t make a potion with no side effects.

Not that she blamed him. Potions were a medicine that forcibly rejuvenated the target body and forced its wounds to heal. Its side effects could be severe, depending on the injuries that needed to be treated. Curing something minor might cause fatigue, but for someone as fatally injured as Sylphy, the toll of healing her body was indescribable.

I’m so sleepy. I think this is all I can do. I’ll leave the rest to Ard. I think I’ll take a nice, long nap...

He would definitely save Ireena and Ginny. Sylphy quickly gave in to slumber, certain of this.

How long have I been out? Sylphy felt a peculiar *rocking* and came to her senses.

Something solid was shaking her petite body. She thought it might be Ireena, Ginny, or maybe Ard and—

“Nnnn. Just a little longer. Let me sleep,” she murmured with a frown.

“*Graghhh...*”

Oh. That didn’t sound human. In fact, it wasn’t human at all.

Spine tingling, Sylphy forced herself to open her eyes. What greeted

her...was shocking.

She should have been passed out in the ruins of the castle in the capital of Asylas...but for whatever reason, she was in a forest.

Dense trees and foliage. The constant hum of bugs and beasts. And...the one who woke her up wasn't Ireena, Ginny, Ard, or even Olivia.

It was some form of bipedal dragon so large you had to look up at it. A gaia dragon, to be exact.

She stared at its huge face.

"Umm, thanks for waking me up. Well, I'm kinda in a hurry, so I really gotta—"

"Graaaaaah!" The dragon opened its gaping maw and attacked, ready to make a meal out of her. Sylphy leaped backward and dodged the talons that came swooping down on her. After confirming she was still equipped with Demise-Argis, she gave a mighty shout.

"Sheesh! It's dragons galore today, huh!" Not showing her giant adversary a shred of fear, she readied her weapon. "I've got no clue what's going on, but I might as well take you down! Take this, you giant lizard!"

Sylphy unleashed her holy blade on it and defeated her foe in one strike... Or she would have liked to, anyway.

"...Huh?" Sylphy had put all her magic into drawing out the sword's power. But it was now silent as the grave. "Hey, um, Demise? What're you doing? Give us a flashy light beam or something. Helloooo?"

She continued to pump magic into it, but the Holy Sword didn't even make a peep.

"Maybe some sort of problem popped up because of my showdown with Elzard?"

In that case, it was a bit of an inconvenience, but she could still fight with her own magic skills. Sylphy tried to cast an attack spell.

However...

"...Huh?"

Nothing happened. No spells materialized.

"Umm..." The situation made Sylphy break out in a cold sweat. "I think dragons and people can be friends. So eating me would be—"

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!" The dragon charged at her without a second thought. Sylphy turned around and ran as fast as her legs would carry her.

“Agh! Come on! What’s happening?!”

In the middle of the vast forest, the Raging Champion’s solitary game of survival was just getting started.



Ireena had punched the feared King of Dragons, hard. A smile had formed on Ginny’s lips when she’d witnessed it, and although Ireena wasn’t there to hear it, she showered her friend with accolades.

“Hee-hee. I knew you could do it. Otherwise, I would have been so disappointed.”

Ireena was an important friend, a rival in love...and Ginny’s inspiration. Ginny felt her own consciousness growing dim.

“It’s a miracle...I made it...this far...”

After Elzard tore through her stomach, Ginny had taken the emergency potion from Ard. This had helped her escape death, but...its side effects, paired with anemia, had rendered her almost immobile. Ginny had endured it as she raced to Ireena’s side, but there was no immediate danger any longer. She threw herself on the ground and closed her eyes.

Ginny assumed that by the time she came to, everything would surely be resolved, and fell into a deep slumber.

She sensed something was off the moment she awoke.

Something quite soft pressed against her cheek. Ginny knew she should have been lying on broken cobblestones... Perhaps the townspeople had brought her to a clinic?

No, that wasn’t it. The scent and texture on her cheek told her it wasn’t a pillow or bed.

It was earth. She was lying on the ground.

She opened her eyes in confusion. “Where am I...?”

At the very least, she knew this wasn’t the capital of Asylas. The scene that greeted her was an unfamiliar plain. Dense fog wafted by, and she could only see the immediate vicinity.

Ginny stood out on the eerie plain. “...Waiting here won’t do me any good.”

She didn’t understand what was going on, but it was best to keep moving for now. Ginny cautiously set out and continued to make progress without

dropping her guard for an instant.

Just then, some sort of silhouette appeared in the thick fog.

“Is this...a totem pole?” Ginny wasn’t really sure what it was supposed to be and placed her hand to her chin as she looked at the peculiar figures. “Come to think of it, Miss Ireena did say there were totem poles in her village,” she murmured to herself.

The details of their previous conversation matched the features of the object before her.

In that case, could this be Ard’s hometown?

“Ah, but their village hardly ever has fog. Besides, why have I been sent someplace else anyway...?”

She had no idea. The situation was a complete mystery to her, and she was starting to grow tired of this unsettling reality.

Just then, she spied something moving through the mist. “Could it be a villager?”

Perfect. If I can just know where I am, it will ease my mind.

Ginny cut through the fog and approached what looked to be villagers—

Then, her eyes grew wide.

“Th-this is...” she squeaked as she stared at the beings before her.

A terrible sight played out before her in the unfamiliar village.



When the white box opened and the glittering golden light blinded me, I had immediately fallen into unconsciousness—

“...—ey! Wa—...! ...—d! ...Wake up, Ard!”

I heard a familiar voice and felt weightless, almost. I came to.

“Hmm?! Are you awake?!”

I opened my eyes and saw an elf boy. Elrado.

I took in my surroundings. ...I was in a classroom at the Academy.

Did Alvarto send me here? But why?

...His motives bothered me, but there was something else that was more important.

“Hey, Ard. You wouldn’t happen to know what’s going on, would you?”

Elrado asked as he peered at me. His question had everything to do with the strangeness of this room. “What’s up with this fog?”

Dense mist filled the classroom...both inside and out.

“It just suddenly showed up, then all of a sudden, you were here.”

I took another look around as I listened to Elrado.

...The students attending summer school and teachers running it were staring at me. They all looked uneasy. ...Honestly, I didn’t have time to be worrying about them. Ireena was kidnapped, and I couldn’t find it in myself to say anything.

“I see. Something real bad must have happened, huh?” Elrado interpreted from my silence. He put his hand on my shoulder. “No need to explain. Just think about what you gotta do.”

“What I have to do...?”

That was obvious. I had to save Ireena. Nothing else was my problem.

“Looks like you’ve found the answer. Okay then, hurry up and go take care of bu—” Elrado began to say with a smile. “Urgh...?!” His expression suddenly contorted with pain.

It wasn’t just Elrado. Everyone in the classroom was in unbelievable agony.

“A-Ard...!”

“M-my body feels weird...!”

“Help...!”

Their wails that rang across the room created a scene too terrible to describe.

“Ggh-gah-ah.”

Elrado and the other students began to transform.

“Guh-geh-gah.”

“Gwagh-gah-gah.”

“Geh-geh-geh.”

They emitted strange sounds as their bodies pulsed.

“What’s happening...?!” My eyes widened at the abnormal sight.

People were changing into monsters. Some grew tentacles. Other became chimeras. Others still became monsters beyond all description.

And then there was Elrado.

“Guh-geh-guh-geh-geh-geh-geh-geh-geh!”

He became a repulsive, pig-like beast.

...This had to be Alvarto's doing. That box was the cause of all this.

"Did you bring me here just so I could watch my friends turn into monsters...?!"

At that moment, I understood with absolute clarity that he was doing all this to make me hate him.

"...Fine. I'll keep my promise to you."

Not only had he abducted my dearest friend, he'd turned his fangs on those who wanted to build a bright future with me. My mercy only went so far.

I would defeat Alvarto and take back my friend.

I looked upon my transformed friends. "Before I save Ireena, I better fix everyone first."

It was most likely the work of some sort of magic. I could use my unique skill of analysis to develop a spell that would turn them back to normal. A simple feat, really.

"Just a moment. I'll analyze the magic now and—" I said to Elrado, but then I started to feel uneasy. "...What's the meaning of this?"

I tried to use my analysis, but something wasn't right.

My special skills wouldn't activate. And that wasn't all. The magic from my body was dissipating. This had to be—

"Alvarto! You cretin! So you've taken my friends and my magic, too...!"

The most I could do was grit my teeth. This was the worst-case scenario.



Kingsglaive. The capital of the Laville Empire of Sorcery.

Finished with her official business, Olivia vel Vine decided to return to this nostalgic town. Her old colleague, Verda al-Hazard, walked alongside her.

"Damn, I can't believe you made me waste all that time running around gathering ingredients. If this device ends up being stupid, I'll kill you."

"Gweh-heh-heh-heh! No worries on that front! We're totally gonna need this someday soon!" Verda replied.

The golden-haired girl was dressed in her trademark white outfit. The

scholar-genius never stayed in one place for long, but for whatever reason, she had made Kingsglaive her home base and had been fervently developing an enchanted item. This was part of the reason she had contacted Olivia.

“...Can’t you give me a better idea of exactly what kind of thing you’re making?”

Naturally, Olivia had her concerns.

Verda remained evasive until this moment, and Olivia assumed she would keep up her innocent act, but the scholar defied her expectations.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. If my guess is correct, it should be starting pretty soon. If I’m gonna give you the lowdown, I guess I should do it now,” she said with a surprisingly serious expression.

Verda was about to explain the details of the device when—Olivia felt oddly cold. It was some sort of omen before disaster.

Something strange sprung up around the main street the two were walking down. Thick fog mushroomed without any warning and stretched across the entire area. Soon after that, they watched as all the citizens became to writhe miserably and—

“Gah-gah-gah.”

“Gee-eh eh.”

“Guh-guh-geh-geh.”

They transformed, making bizarre noises—an odd and horrifying spectacle.

Olivia and Verda, however, were famed Heavenly Kings. It would take more than something like this to throw them off.

“Hmph. Is *this* the event what you prepared your machine for?”

“Bingooo, Livvy! It might help us beat Al at his own game!

“...‘Al’? You don’t mean...”

“Yup, our former colleague.”

Olivia was able to get the general gist of what was going on.

So this horror show was Alvarto’s doing.

Everything that had happened up until that point, including the messy war, was probably because he was pulling the strings behind the scenes. All so he could fight an all-out battle with Ard Meteor...that is, the Demon Lord Varvatos.

“Verda. Did you know this would happen?”

“Wellll, not really. I didn’t know when or how it would unfold. I just

knew something was coming and guessed it might be today or tomorrow.”

Even as everyone around them changed into monsters, Verda had a silly grin on her face as she went on. “Al contacted me a few days ago, y’know. Well, we talked about all sorts of stuff, but at the end, he said this to me: ‘Why don’t you join me in a fun little battle with our master?’”

“...And how did you answer?”

“If I joined up with Al, he’d have three Heavenly Kings on his side. That’d leave Var with only you, Livvy. Doesn’t sound very fair, does it? That’s why I told him I’d stick with Var, and he flashed me a big smile. It seems like he wants to go at it with me, too.”

Verda cackled at his crazed lust for battle. As she did, the citizens continued to transform into beasts.

“They may look grotesque, but as to whether they still possess human will...” Olivia said, staring at the horde of monsters before them.

The people-turned-monsters spotted the two and immediately let out mighty shrieks.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

It was clear they no longer had any grip on themselves. The swarm raced toward them with every intent to kill.

“Tch. What a damn pain.” Unsheathing her sword, Olivia prepared to take on the approaching monsters. She was known as the world’s greatest swordsmaster. Her skills were godlike. Even in the face of such things, she could take care of the mob in the blink of an eye.

Not a single life was lost, however. Each one was struck with the back of the sword. Although they had been turned into monsters, they could probably be returned to their original forms at some point.

With the help of the scholar-genius with self-proclaimed divine intellect, that is.

“...Honestly. To think a time would ever come when we’d need *your* help to win a fight,” Olivia grumbled with a sigh as she looked at Verda.

“Gah?! Hey!” the scholar yelled. “Um, dearest customers of this establishment! We have a no-touching policy here!”

Sweating all over and looking frantic, Verda dodged the attacks of the monsters. Olivia stared at her questioningly.

“What the hell are you doing? Just counterattack.”

“I can’t even if I want to! My magic’s been sealed!”

“...What was that?”

As soon as Olivia heard this, it hit her. The magic coursing through her body was gone. Was this another one of Alvarto’s schemes?

Nevertheless, she wasn’t perturbed in the least. After all, she wasn’t really one for magic.

She’d always been that way. She didn’t have a knack for it and instead chose to hone her swordsmanship and the physical abilities unique to her as a therianthrope. Olivia had never cast even a single spell in battle. Thus, a situation like this where all magic was cut off meant nothing to her. However...

“Verda. This is pretty hard on people like you who specialize in magic, huh?”

“Yeah! Totally! So hurry up and help me out! I’m begging ya!” the scholar-genius cried out, her voice ragged. She was having a rough time, that was for sure.

With a sigh, Olivia closed in on the enemy in an instant and took care of each one.

“You okay?”

“*Hah...hah...!* Y-yeah, thank you...!”

All the monsters in the immediate area were now down for the count.

However...the population of Kingsglave was over ten thousand. If they *all* became monsters...

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Obviously, it meant there were a stream of reinforcements.

“We don’t have time to deal with every single one. Let’s run for it, Verda.”

“What? I dunno, I’m not exactly the most athletic person. Give me a piggyback ride, Livvy,” Verda demanded, sinking down to the ground as if exhausted from all her recent dodging.

“...Tch. You better start working out when all this is over. Got it?”

“Roger that! I’ll concoct the perfect drug.”

Relying on science instead of physical ability was a very Verda-like idea.

Olivia picked her up and raced through the foggy town; their destination was the research lab that Verda had made her base of operations.

“We have to hurry up and finish that device, right?”

“Yup. We’ll definitely need it if we wanna win,” Verda replied casually.

Olivia asked her next question in the calmest of tones. "...What are our chances of winning?"

"Good question. Honestly, we're in a worst-case scenario here. Way worse than I hypothesized. I'm pretty sure our odds are somewhere in the single-digit range. Even if Var goes all out, it won't change anything."

Olivia sniffed. "Single digits, huh? So that means—"

"Uh-huh. That's basically as good as a hundred percent."

All that mattered was that it wasn't zero percent. As long as that was the case, they could keep increasing their chances of victory. After all, that was how they had won the war several thousand years before. And that sparked confidence in these two. Verda grinned as she clung to Olivia's back.

"The game's just getting started."



The capital of the Asylas Federation, Hearl-Si-Pearl.

The city, known for its townscape full of atmospheric wooden buildings, was now a nightmarish scene rampant with monsters. A foggy, fiendish paradise.

In the heart of the city, the castle that fell to Elzard's destruction was beautifully restored...and was now *his* stronghold.

"A single man waiting in an empty castle surrounded by an inhuman mob. Heh. The very image of the Demon Lord from our fairy tales. Wouldn't you agree, Lizer Bellphoenix?"

In the massive audience hall, Alvarto sat on the throne with his legs crossed as the old general stood before him.

Lizer gave a tiny nod and voiced his opinion on the situation. "Our utopia has essentially been realized. The people's minds are now under the control of the Strange Cube, and you and I have joined forces against a common enemy—the Demon Lord. Everything is going according to plan."

The Strange Cube. A device that could be activated with the soul of an Evil God and used to alter reality. It had been left behind by one such Evil God—the man who was Alvarto's former master, the Champion Lydia's father, Ireena's ancestor, and Varvatos's lifelong rival. And Alvarto had used

this terrible mechanism to change the world. On the surface, it looked like they were creating the paradise Lizer hoped for.

Alvarto was more than happy to praise the details of their plan. “Half of the continent will be teeming with monsters and covered in fog. The other half will be a society for humans where the sun shines. The people can join hands and spend their days free of discrimination and prejudice. However, peace gives rise to boredom, and boredom turns to madness. So we need to give them some form of adrenaline to prevent everyone from going mad. That role will be played by the monster army and me—Alvarto the Demon Lord.”

The core of humanity would never change, even if they completely overhauled their way of thinking. Knowing this, Lizer intended to unite the people by pitting them up against a common enemy. That was his way of realizing his utopia. An enemy would reinforce the bonds between humans and keep his dream alive.

“We will first use this continent as a model and monitor how circumstances fare,” Lizer started. “After we make the necessary adjustments, the fruit of our labors—”

“—will spread from the continent to the entire world.”

“Indeed. And when that time comes, you shall aid me once more.”

Lizer wouldn’t take no for an answer.

A lovely smile crept on Alvarto’s lips as he looked upon the old man’s tight expression.

“I promise to fulfill your every desire. After all, that’s the pact we’ve had since the very beginning. However, Sir Lizer, I don’t work for free. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“...Yes. As terrifying as that fact may be,” Lizer replied, nodding.

In his eyes, his utopia was ninety percent complete. Which meant he wasn’t finished.

A few factors were to blame for this, one of which was Ard Meteor.

It was entirely possible to erase the likes of him with the Strange Cube, yet Alvarto decided that he was not going to do so—all to have his ultimate battle and...end his own life in the best way possible.

Because Lizer was aware of this, he could only let out a slow exhale.

“...I already agreed to the terms, you know. We talked about how the rebels might be annoying, but it’s not like they’re immune to being killed by

us. Isn't that right?"

"Yes. In fact, we should go on a campaign to wipe them out. You know, be more proactive about it. Their magic is sealed right now, yet we can unleash ours in full force. It might be a completely one-sided battle, but we should give them a taste of real hell."

Lizer knew he didn't mean any of that.

Alvarto was waiting—waiting for the moment when Ard and his friends would overcome the trials Lizer set up them and come running to him.

"...I shall uphold our pact, but I do not think your ideal scenario will come to pass," Lizer stated.

And with that, he returned to his own stronghold.

As if to fill the void, Kalmia appeared beside Alvarto.

"Ah, you're back. So my trusty sidekick, what has become of that Frenzied King of Dragons?"

"...I've determined it's impossible to locate her in a short amount of time."

"Really now?" Alvarto's handsome features broke into a jubilant smile. "What do you think will happen? Will she ingratiate herself to us? Act indifferent? Or maybe..."

"She might do something unexpected. It is not entirely impossible."

At Kalmia's reply, Alvarto looked up with a spellbound expression.

"Another touch of drama to our final battle, then. Marvelous. Ah, this will be a delight," he murmured with a tone of self-satisfaction.

He remained lost in his fantasy world for some time before continuing.

"This is all thanks to that girl."

As he said this, Alvarto and Kalmia teleported to another location—a spacious guest room.

On a luxurious, canopied bed at the very center... a beautiful elven girl—Ireena—lay prone.

"Ah, *Fräulein*. I wonder what dreams you are having right now? A terrible nightmare where your own existence is overrun? Or a dream where your friends rush to their own suffering? ...Either way, I need a bit more time before I can make your dreams a reality."

Alvarto gently stroked Ireena's silver hair with a bewitching smile.

“In the meantime—I shall have you listen to the story of my life, if you can call it that. I’m afraid it isn’t very interesting, but it may provide you enough amusement to stave off your boredom.”

AFTERWORD

It's been a while. It's me, Myojin Katou.

I imagine it'll be the dead of winter by the time this volume is in your hands. I personally love winter. I'm terrible with the heat but great with the cold, so I don't even turn on the heater, which means my electric bill goes way down. Plus, 'tis the season for delicious hot pot. There's always the chance I'll get sick of it, since I have it so often.

Best of all...

There's not a bug in sight.

I hate to brag, but I'm the world's biggest insect hater.

I had the worst time last summer. I'll never forget what happened in July.

It was night, hot and sticky. The darn things were out in full force, and for the first time in a while, I found one in my room. It was smallish. If you were immune to bugs, you might laugh it off and ignore it.

Being the wimp that I am, I screamed like a beaver when I saw it. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Thus began a battle between me and the pesky thing that lasted well into the night. It was a very quiet war, I assure you.

The bug was small, but not microscopic. It was the buzzing type, but this particular specimen could fly around without a sound. So once I lost track of it, I couldn't try and listen to find it again.

In this most awful of situations, I stealthily snuck up on the insect, my eyes shooting daggers at it. Slow and steady so as not to startle it, I took hold of the bug spray in the corner—a permanent fixture in my room...and sprayed like there was no tomorrow. My aim was perfect, and I hit its entire body. I was sure I'd done it in, but...

"Aaaaaaaah?!" It charged straight at my face as if it didn't feel a thing. I

dodged my foe's ambush. It had some weird power of rejuvenation! Since it didn't make a sound, I instantly lost sight of it again.

By that point, it was already three AM. I should have been getting sleep, so I could make good progress on my manuscript the next day, but I knew I would get no rest with an enemy lurking in the shadows.

I looked for the little bugger. I was sweating like crazy, and my eyes were bloodshot. I grabbed an extra can of bug spray.

"There you are! I got you now!"

Like one of the black team members in *Predator* (his name is completely slipping my mind at the moment), I sprayed, screaming bloody murder. I only used one can at first. Now, I was armed with two. This little jerk had no choice but to fall to my Double Spray Kill.

But it lived on and writhed in agony on the cold, hard earth.

There was no room for mercy. With a Final Spray Splash, I finished the job and won the battle. I sighed as I wiped the sweat from my brow and smiled with a sense of accomplishment.

I was drunk on the sweet taste of victory—but then I suddenly realized...

The worst was yet to come.

"...How should I get rid of it?"

The curtain once again rose on my late-night battle—

I'd like to take some time to offer some words of acknowledgement.

So many people helped me bring this volume to life, including Sao Mizuno, who has gifted us with such wonderful illustrations. There are no words to express my gratitude.

Furthermore, I would like to give a most heartfelt "thank you" to you for picking up this book. I hope we can meet again in the next one!

Myojin Katou

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