

The Greatest
Demon Lord
IS REBORN
AS A
TYPICAL
NOBODY

Clown of the
Outer Gods

7

Myojin Katou

Illustration by
Sao Mizuno



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Demon
Lord
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Clown of the
Outer Gods



“See?
We
meet
again.”

Mephisto

The most powerful Evil God of all. Varvatos's archnemesis. Frequently tormented him in the ancient past.

“...Impossible.”

“It can't
be...!”

Olivia

A former Heavenly King in the Demon Lord's army. Now supports Ard and his friends from the sidelines. Teaches as a guest lecturer at the Laville Academy of Magic.

Ard

The ex-Demon Lord. Used to be the most powerful being in existence. Rushes into the transformed world to save his captured friend, Irenea.



Lizer

A former Heavenly King. He uses the Strange Cube to force his "ideal utopia" onto the world.

“Disappear,
disappear,
disappear,
disappear,
disappear,
disappear...!”

“—Don’t
make
any more
mistakes,
Lizer
Bellphoenix.”

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The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 7

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 7 SOTONARU KAMI NO PIERO

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CONTENTS

The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody

Myojin Katou

Illustration by Sao Mizuno

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[SIDE STORY Dreams of the Deficient](#)

[CHAPTER 83 The Ex–Demon Lord and the Hunt for Magic](#)

[CHAPTER 84 The Ex–Demon Lord and the Greatest Psycho](#)

[CHAPTER 85 The Ex–Demon Lord and a Twist](#)

[SIDE STORY The Failure, Unsatisfied](#)

[CHAPTER 86 The Ex–Demon Lord and the Reunion in the Labyrinth](#)

[CHAPTER 87 The Ex–Demon Lord and the Meaning of Finality](#)

[CHAPTER 88 The Raging Champion, Slaying for Love](#)

[CHAPTER 89 The Ex–Demon Lord and a Mysterious Young Girl](#)

[SIDE STORY The Failure, Incapable of Resisting Evil](#)

[CHAPTER 90 The Ex–Demon Lord in Enemy Territory](#)

[CHAPTER 91 The Ex–Demon Lord and Malice, Uncovered](#)

[CHAPTER 92 The Ex–Demon Lord and the Whereabouts of Love](#)

[CHAPTER 93 The Ex–Demon Lord and Where Love Leads](#)

[CHAPTER 94 The Ex–Demon Lord and the Salvation of the Failure](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



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SIDE STORY

Dreams of the Deficient

Every human being—no matter who they were—had a past.

Even *he* was no exception.

Born the child of painfully average parents, he was raised in a remote village with his two older brothers. He realized one day that his siblings were making names for themselves in their hometown.

The eldest brother became a skilled warrior who fended off monster attacks—a dangerous affair. This might have been why he was permitted to marry the daughter of the village elder—the most beautiful woman in the village. He was expected to become their next leader.

The middle son was gifted with intellect—an undeniable genius. Daily crowds formed outside their house, seeking his wisdom.

The youngest son, on the other hand...had nothing to note.

His androgynous features were comely, bewitching almost. Meeting his gaze was dangerous for young maidens—and even men fell under his spell. But barring his appearance, he had no other remarkable traits...at least, according to the villagers' assessments.

—However, his brothers knew the truth: He was a monster.

This discovery was made when the eldest had brother extended an invitation to him.

“I’m going to teach you how to hunt today.”

The eldest brother intended to put him through a little trial, hoping to spark something in his apathetic sibling. That was why they entered the mountains near the village...but they soon ran into an unfamiliar monster. Even the eldest brother, a true warrior, couldn’t hold his ground against it. No one would have ever guessed he was the village hero as he fell in terror and pathetically begged for his life.

Naturally, a monster wouldn’t show any compassion. Just as the eldest brother was about to be at the mercy of its sharp fangs...

“Ugh, fine.”

The speaker had a monotonous voice, one that was frigid. As soon as the youngest brother spoke up, the monster’s movements ground to a halt...and then its severed head rolled on the earth.

The eldest brother was taken by momentary confusion...until the situation finally registered in his mind, and he blinked at his little brother.

“Did you do that?”

“Uh-huh.” He acted and sounded like he couldn’t care less. This was an affront to the eldest brother’s pride.

He hadn’t managed to do anything in the face of grave danger, while his younger brother had handled it without much thought...the same younger brother he had looked down on all these years. That was enough to shatter his reputation. But the youngest sibling took it a step further—behaving in a way that was far from gloating, acting like he’d killed it only to pass time.

It was disgraceful! It was mortifying! However, the eldest brother did not voice his emotions, choosing to offer his gratitude instead...because there was a far more powerful emotion overshadowing his rage: fear.

The eldest brother saw him as an unknowable monster from that day forward.

—The middle brother also discovered this on his own.

On this day, the middle brother had gathered a group of small children to hold an open-air class. There was no schoolhouse in the village, so the most intelligent members were tasked with imparting basic knowledge and education. He taught the children all kinds of things, but unsurprisingly, his magic classes were by far the most popular. Magic was the greatest mystery of life and a stimulating toy to the little ones.

“Oh, if it isn’t my little brother. How about a lesson or two?”

The youngest brother was already fifteen—far older than the other students. In the eyes of society, he was a full-fledged adult...but no one treated him that way. He was a freeloader with no work ethic to speak of, consuming the village’s resources yet contributing nothing.

The middle brother viewed him with disdain. Even his offer was a sarcastic one—he didn’t mean it.

“...Sure. I’ll join in,” answered the younger brother, stone-faced.

This was how he had ended up participating in an open-air class with small children. They observed him with curiosity in their eyes, exchanging

looks and asking him mean questions as children do—“Why are you here if you’re so old?” “Are you stupid?”

No average person would withstand this environment, but he didn’t raise as much as an eyebrow.

This infuriated the middle brother... In fact, it gave him the creeps. He couldn’t read his younger brother’s mind. It was humiliating for him—for someone known for his intelligence.

Yet, he kept this to himself and continued with the lecture.

“Hang on. You made an error there with this technique,” objected the youngest brother, pointing to the magic circle drawn on the ground. “You wanted to rearrange explosion magic to turn them into fireworks, but the output conversion is insufficient. You’ll get hurt if you cast it now.”

The circle on the ground was the work of the middle brother, and it was his very first spell reconfiguration after a series of experiments with multiple high-level techniques. There were no errors in his spell or theory. He would demonstrate this to everyone and bask in their praise. He had such faith in his flawless reconfiguration that his own genius frightened even him.

...And yet, his little brother had just gone and declared it worthless.

The middle brother raised his voice. “Go ahead and run off somewhere if you’re scared. I’ll prove you’re wrong.”

He pointed off into the distance, and his eyes said, *Get lost*.

Even so, the youngest brother’s expression remained unchanging.

“...I see. It seems *you can’t offer what I want*, so I better get going,” he said indifferently before walking away.

Behind him, the middle brother imagined spitting in his direction as he focused his magic into the circle on the ground.

—He never could have guessed what would happen next.

As the youngest brother had pointed out, there was an error in his technique. The explosion magic *did* transform into fireworks, but the output conversion *was* all wrong. Fireworks sprayed everywhere. The middle brother and the children sustained severe burns.

The middle brother’s reputation fell after this incident and never recovered. Every time he saw the burn scars on the upper half of his body, he felt unbearable disgust...and terrifying dread.

How had his younger brother discovered a flaw in his technique? How and when had he surpassed him in intellect?

Like his older brother, the middle brother soon saw the youngest as a monster.

And in reality...he *was* a monster. He was aware of this fact. The youngest brother knew a depraved beast slumbered somewhere within.

Thus...even when he predicted the last days of the village and imagined the final moments of his family...

He felt nothing.

He was twenty now.

News arrived that a demon—high-ranking in societal structures—would visit the village. According to the messenger, they wanted to see the brightest person their community had to offer.

If they wanted brains, it would be between the eldest and middle brothers.

A saturnalian spirit reigned over the village.

For the first time in history, someone from their village might become the servant of a great demon.

...He observed their wild revelry with apathy.

This is the end, he thought for no reason in particular. *Something terrible will happen if I stay here.*

He had no basis for thinking this, but he was convinced it was true. And so he left the village before the anticipated visit. The timing was perfect. No one in this settlement accepted him anyway.

He decided to look in the outside world for someone who would.

—Two months had passed since he left his village to set off on an aimless journey.

He knew that demon had destroyed his home.

He wasn't sure why. It could have been on a whim or the result of someone's carelessness. At any rate, all the villagers had been killed. In the foulest, unholy of ways.

This included his brothers, who had secretly feared him, and his parents, who had loved him.

Their skewered corpses still had to be lying in the ruins of the settlement.

He pictured the scene yet felt nothing.

Not anger or sorrow. And that made him sadder and more furious than anything else.

Fast-forward—

He was seventy-six now.

He stepped into a certain town. Any passersby who glanced at him immediately looked away and made sure not to make the same mistake twice.

That much was to be expected. After all, he was a pathetic-looking vagrant. Gone were all traces of his androgynous youth, replaced with a long, scraggly beard and gray hair. He wore shabby hemp clothes. Even the local beggars looked more presentable.

He paid his surroundings no mind and continued to stagger forward on unsteady feet; nothing reflected in those hollow eyes of his.

Nothing in all of creation held any value.

That was what he'd learned from his travels.

Once, he'd had a desire. He'd set out on a journey to find it, to live his life as a real person. He'd wanted to bury that lost piece of his heart and die as a decent human being.

However...his wish never came true. He wasn't even sure what it was he'd wanted to begin with. In other words...

Yes, that had to be it.

What he sought had never existed in the first place.

...In that case, why was he still walking? So that was his conclusion. There was no reason to take one step farther. Living was meaningless.

For a second, he doubted it, and in the next instant...

...he plunged to the earth.

His foot struck a hole in the ground, and he pitched forward. He had unknowingly entered the slums, and no one cared about a fallen old man. When he looked around, he saw the corpses of several other vagrants. He'd be joining them soon enough.

But he still felt empty. He was born from nothingness, lived in nothingness, and would die as nothing. It was a proper end for someone like him.

“Mister! Are you okay?!”

Why did he find the young girl’s voice so comforting?

His unconsciousness quickly faded...and when he awoke, he saw an unfamiliar ceiling. He was in a strange bed.

“Ah! You’re awake, Mister! Thank goodness!”

Once again, he felt a zap in his brain. When he turned toward the voice, he found a young, homely girl standing there and looking at him with relief.

“...Where am I?” he asked, voice frail and hoarse.

The girl drew closer. “An orphanage. I wanted to bring you to a real clinic...but I don’t have any money. All I could do was wipe off your sweat, feed you porridge, and give you water. Unfortunately, the clinic director said you wouldn’t get any better.”

“...Huh.”

Even he was surprised that he’d been nursed back to health from a critical state.

But he felt no joy or relief.

Why am I still alive? Is my creator ordering me to continue in agony?

“...You should have just left me to die,” he muttered, almost involuntarily.

The girl glared at him. “Hey! Don’t say that! Many people in the world don’t get to live even though they want to!” she scolded him. It’d generally be the other way around.

Most with average sensibilities would reflect on their actions and feel a degree of shame. Or they might prepare a theoretical argument, as adults often did, and discount the youngster.

He had no desire to do either. On the other hand...

He felt a strange warmth in his chest. It was faint yet undeniable. He’d never felt such a sensation before.

What is this?

As his mind began racing...

“By the way, Mister, what’s your name?”

He turned to her once again, and her large eyes stared straight at him with a captivating charm. The growing emotions continued to bewilder him.

“...I have no name. I abandoned it long ago. It has no value to someone like myself.”

“Huh.” The girl looked at him like she didn’t get it and crossed her arms.

“That’s kind of annoying. Now I don’t know what to call you.”

“...Call me what you want.”

The response seemed blunt, but the girl didn’t appear to particularly mind. Her arms still crossed, she gazed up at the ceiling.

“Hmmmmmmmm. I see. You look like a character in my favorite picture book, Mister... So that can be your first name... As for your last name... maybe it could be the name of this town?”

Having evidently come to a decision, the girl puffed up her chest in preparation for the big reveal. A grin spread across her face.

“Lizer! Lizer Bellphoenix! From now on, I’ll call you Lizer!”

He didn’t care about his new name...or so he’d thought.

“...It has a nice ring to it.”

He was shocked by the words that came from his mouth.

Lizer Bellphoenix. A man past his prime.

Nearing the end of his days...

He finally found what he was looking for.



“Dreaming of the past is an omen of misfortune.”

The voice was melodious but provided no comfort. Lizer Bellphoenix returned to reality. When he opened his eyes, he was met by a darkness spreading across the room.

Lizer rose irritably and faced a corner of the chamber. There, a beautiful man silently stood within the inky darkness he controlled. His eyes were fixed upon Lizer.

“...Alvarto Egzex.”

This was the man’s name.

Glossy black hair. Looks that put prided beauties to shame. Splendid garments, deep crimson.

Like Lizer, Alvarto had once been a Heavenly King...but now, he was the *joint administrator* of this world.

Alvarto was assessing him; his face wiped clean of his usual smile. The man’s expression was deadpan, and his cold, narrow gaze looked Lizer over with great prejudice. At least, that was how it appeared to him.

“...I don’t think I did anything to warrant this. All that’s happened is the result of your own foolish desires.”

He wouldn’t have reached for the *forbidden fruit* otherwise.

“It’s almost been half a month—half a month since we should have changed this world and formed our utopia—half a month...since we should have eliminated a certain subset of people. Yet, we’ve managed to do nothing. In fact...we’ve permitted them to regroup,” Alvarto stated.

He was referring to Ard Meteor, the person formerly known as the Demon Lord, and his companions.

To Lizer, they were the biggest threat of all. Back when the world transformed, he could have eliminated them if he’d tried...but his pact with Alvarto had fettered him. Now, it was Lizer who was being driven into a corner.

“In the beginning, I didn’t think much of it. I was certain the Demon Lord would be no match for us if he were stripped of his magic... I never imagined he’d be so persistent.”

Lizer hadn’t thought he’d let his guard down. From the start, he’d focused all his resources on this. Nothing was tepid about his schemes—crafty, cowardly, foul as they were—to annihilate Ard and his party. However...

Ard Meteor had changed all of Lizer’s best-laid plans to his advantage in the worst ways imaginable.

“...He’s a monster. I knew the man was an absolute terror. Even without magic, the Demon Lord remains secure in himself. Yes, that’s why—”

“We need a beast *greater than the Demon Lord*. According to you.”

Alvarto’s frigid beauty grew icier.

“I get it. I imagined that might be the case. Still, I never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, *ever* believed you would choose this route. And that’s the real problem here. It’s ridiculous. Practically suicide! I didn’t think you’d already gone senile, Lizer Bellphoenix.”

Arrows of critique rained down upon Lizer. No one who knew of Alvarto would imagine this type of behavior coming from him. He was putatively elegant, forever composed, and constantly in control of his emotions. Now, however, he was angry, shattering his reputation.

...Perhaps it was more accurate to say he was anxious.

Alvarto wasn’t alone. Even Lizer shared this feeling.

“If I may be honest, I cannot deny I have concerns of my own. This pawn

—the one I have produced—is fiendish, difficult to defeat, and impossibly strong. But I am prepared. We can retain control of it. I would not have unleashed such a thing otherwise.”

“I see. In that case, do allow me to observe. The die has been cast. There’s no stopping it now. It is your hand that broke the seal. Thus, badgering you in the dead of night serves no purpose. Ah—wretched. Lizer Bellphoenix, I’m so disappointed in you. Love makes people blind, but I trusted you might be different.”

Alvarto moved to make his exit, sulking all the while. He stopped short to deliver one final message, however.

“I pray this blunder brings you and your loved one the result you want.”

With those cruelly insincere words, he slipped into the night.

Lizer sighed and cradled his head in his hands once the unpleasant visitor was gone. Alvarto had managed to make him question everything. His heart pounded; he felt a sharp pain in his stomach. It served as proof that Lizer was indeed human.

Yes, he was no longer a monster. It instantly triggered memories of the girl who had made that possible.

“...I’ll settle down if I can get just a glance,” he murmured before rising from bed and casting teleportation magic.

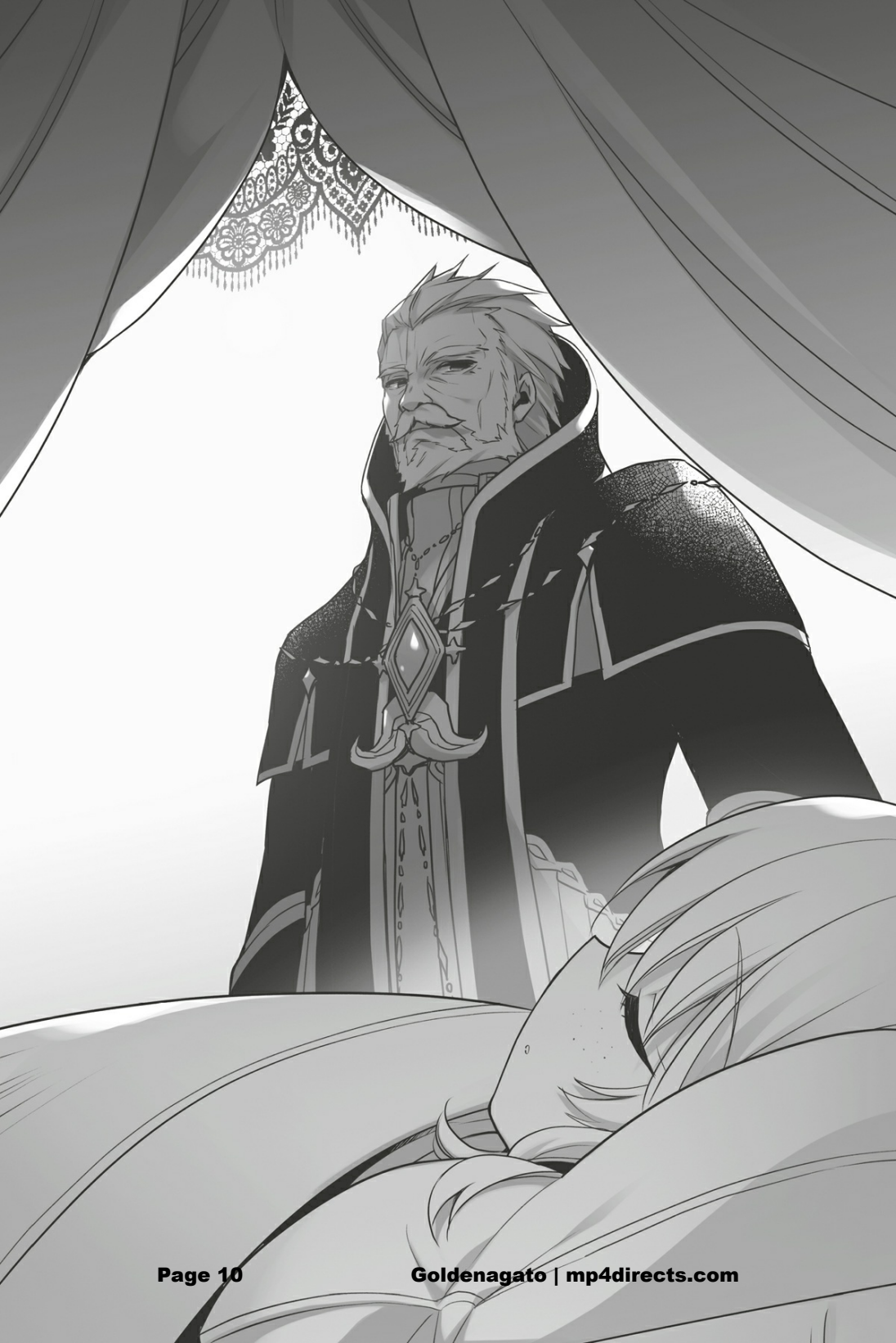
The spell transported him to a different chamber. The soft light from a wall sconce by the bed illuminated the place. Her breaths—soft in sleep—echoed quietly.

“...Maria.” Lizer looked with a particular fondness at the girl sleeping on the bed. She was a young human who appeared to be no older than ten. Although she possessed no distinctive features and was rather plain, she was everything to Lizer.

“I won’t lose you again...! *This time*, I’ll make you happy...!”

As he gazed at young Maria in slumber, Lizer Bellphoenix felt his heart burn.

For this girl, he would overcome any obstacle—



CHAPTER 83

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Hunt for Magic

The Strange Cube. A device created by a certain Evil God that could change the world as we know it. And its activation had done just that.

Alvarto Egzex. Lizer Bellphoenix.

My former subordinates had outdone me. I'd lost everything precious to me in this era. My classmates had turned into monsters, and Ireena—the girl who meant more to me than anything in the world—had fallen into enemy hands.

Not even our magic was spared, as the enemy snatched it away. The situation couldn't possibly get any worse.

So what?

I—*we* would never give up. We would steal the Strange Cube, rescue Ireena, and save the world...and to do that—

We were currently racing through the old capital of Kingsglaive.

All the residents in the former capital had been turned into monsters. A horde of demons—Alvarto's subordinates—had been stationed there, ready to stop our advance...but no one could hold us back. Not even a stream of enemies.

"Surround them! Don't let 'em get by!"

"There are only five of them! How are we failing to stop them?!"

"Call for backup! They'll break through at this rate!"

The city was now a battlefield. Angry shouts and the sounds of a violent blitz overlapped in a terrible din. Cobblestones were smashed. Buildings collapsed. Dust was kicked up. We weaved through the main drag, racing past the damage while cutting down anyone who stood in our way.

"*Hah!*" A flash of Olivia's sword and demons were cleaved in two.

Olivia was the world's best swordsperson in both name and spirit. I've depended on her during battles—past and present—for her mastery of the sword and raw power. Her strength, therefore, hadn't been impacted by the loss of magic.

"Black Hole! Black Hole! Black Hooooole!"

Verda Al-Hazard.

Like Olivia, the mad scientist—and former Heavenly King—was operating in her usual way, despite the circumstances. She was using some kind of power that even I didn't fully comprehend. Dark vortexes opened in the sky, sucking up enemies en masse.

"I'm not gonna let you guys have all the fun!"

"I'll fulfill my role!"

Sylphy and Ginny. Each of them had a long sword held tight in their hands. They were virtually helpless on the battlefield without magic, but their blades, possessed of peculiar hilts, made up for it some.

Responding to the girls' cries, the lines at the center of the hilts glimmered. An instant later...Sylphy rushed forward at impossible speeds, slicing through foes like a flash of lightning. Ice knives formed around Ginny, shooting toward any opponent obstructing her path.

"Gah...! Didn't they lose their magic?! How are they able to do this...?!"

The answer was Verda. She'd predicted this situation and devised a plan to compensate for our handicaps—internal magic devices.

If you charged the collection unit embedded in the hilt with magic beforehand, you could draw upon it instead of your own power. This was how Sylphy, Ginny, and I were fighting next to Olivia.

"...That said, it doesn't seem like you'll need me."

They were all jumping in before I could make a move, taking care of every threat in sight. It had been this way since the moment we set foot in Kingsglave, which meant I hadn't landed a single attack. To be honest, I felt a little bad.

"You're our final line of defense, Ard!" Ginny assured.

"Yup! It's just not your time yet!" Verda agreed.

"Leave these minions to us," Olivia added.

"We'll show ya what we can do on our own!" Sylphy said.

I watched my friends conduct themselves like heroes in an action scene before sprinting down the path they'd cleared for us.

Verda began to cackle. “Wow, they weren’t kidding about finding strength in numbers! I can’t believe this is the same road that seemed impossible to follow!”

She was referring to the moment when she and Olivia had scrambled to the research lab to complete a particular magic device right after the world changed. Lizer must have anticipated they might, because the town quickly became plagued with monsters, demons waiting for their arrival. Verda and Olivia, capable as they were, had been overpowered and forced to retreat. Sometime after that, they’d met up with us—which brings us to now.

“I’m praying they didn’t destroy the lab!”

“Don’t you have some barriers in place over the whole thing?”

“I guess. But I’m pretty sure they won’t last long. Al and Lizer feel threatened by my inventions. I wouldn’t be surprised if they broke ’em already.”

If that happened, it’d be over for us.

I hoped the lab was intact as I pressed forward. The demons continued their assault, attempting to surround us, but it was all in vain.

We scattered them—kicking, trampling, and annihilating our way to our destination.

Then finally...we saw it. There, at the end of the long road before us: the lab.

A sparkling, semicircular golden dome protected the grounds, and the building itself didn’t have so much as a scratch.

“Seems we’ve made it in time.”

We needed only to continue forward, and we would be that much closer to rescuing Ireena.

I needed to bring her back. I would give my own life if it meant she returned home.

“Stop them! *Now!*”

“Freeze! Don’t move!”

“Where the hell *is* he?!”

This was a do-or-die moment for the enemy. Their onslaughts were the toughest attacks we’d faced...but it wasn’t enough to stop us.

We trampled everything in our way and pressed on. The destination was right before our eyes. And just as we were about to reach it, a man slowly appeared from around the corner of the lab.

We stopped in our tracks. We had no other choice.

“...So they’re introducing their final line of defense here, huh?” I scowled at him like the others were doing.

He looked like an old vagabond. Disheveled reddish-brown hair. Five-o’clock shadow. Ragged hemp clothes that added to his shabby look.

“...He isn’t just any old man.”

We nodded at Olivia’s evaluation. That wanderer wasn’t fooling anyone here.

Olivia quietly assessed our enemy. “He’s tall. Muscular. Spry body. Those calf muscles—curiously big. I imagine he’s a soldier who specializes in close combat... Watch out, everyone.”

“Obviously. I knew that. And I haven’t been able to spot a single opening.”

Olivia and Sylphy seemed aware of who we were dealing with. The tension was evident in their faces. Meanwhile, the demons watched the ongoing situation in silence as if they hadn’t just been trying to kill us.

“He’s finally here...!”

“Talk about last minute. But at least he made it in time...”

“Even these guys—monsters in their own right—can’t beat him without their magic...!”

Their comments contained hope, trust, and reverential fear.

With all eyes on him, the man in question spoke gravely. “I will take your life.”

A calm, quiet voice. It held neither hostility nor bloodlust, which was probably why...no one had time to react when he drew the sword at his side.

“Ngh!”

He was like the embodiment of a gale. We realized the man was right in front of Olivia. A split second later, there was a flash of bare steel.

He had challenged Olivia to a swordfight. If this had been any typical opponent, one might assume they were completely out of their mind. However—

“Tch!”

She evaded the first swing. The second, she defended against with her magical blade. By the third, she swung back but caught empty air. The man had already moved behind Olivia.

“Aaaaaaargh!”

With a mighty cry, Sylphy launched an attack of her own. The sword thrust was lightning-fast and deadly sharp, aiming for the side of his face. But it never made contact.

Just as the tip of the sword was about to find its mark...the enemy's figure rippled like a mirage and vanished.

This was no act of magic. He had dodged with sheer agility...which is to say, at impossible speed.

"Olivia vel Vine. I don't think you have what it takes to be called a *master swordsperson*," muttered the man as he stood directly in front of the research lab like some sort of gatekeeper.

Usually, Olivia would have immediately shot back. However, she didn't say anything this time, a trail of sweat trickling down her forehead. If Sylphy hadn't blocked, Olivia might have been defeated. Reality left her speechless.

"I've no interest in greenhorns. You're my only target," the man whispered, leveling the tip of his weapon at me. "The name's Sergia Nagan. I wish to have a one-on-one fight with you, Ard Meteor."

"...You want a duel, even though you have the power to take us all on?"

The enemy seemed to catch that I was skeptical of his motives.

He shook his head. "I don't have any cunning schemes in mind. There are two reasons why I want to battle you alone. First, it is my preference. I won't be satisfied unless I engage directly with someone I deem worthy. Second... if I defeat you, Ard Meteor, I will be able to have a fight to the death with *my liege*. That's my greatest wish. It is the only reason I, Sergia, have lived this long."

"*My liege*." He had to be talking about Alvarto. Then did that mean this man was from the ancient past, too? Only the soldiers who were directly under Alvarto's command called him that.

If this was the case, I had no doubt that he was a skilled soldier.

"...Ard, it might not be right, but we should all attack him," Ginny whispered in my ear.

I'd accept this duel, and we'd ambush him. I imagined Ginny thought this would guarantee our victory.

"You're right that it would make sense to take advantage of our numbers. But...I'm afraid that's not a good idea in this situation. In fact, there is a decent chance that it will do more harm than good."

In order to have strength in numbers, you needed team cooperation. And

how unified were we, really? I'd say a little. We were at our strongest when we acted as individuals, so I knew teamwork wasn't our forte. Taking on a warrior like Sergia as a unit would be a huge mistake. There was no question that we'd fall apart and be crushed under his thumb.

"I hate to admit it, but I gotta side with Ard here," said Sylphy.

"I'm not a fan of Ginny's plan, so I'll also pass," Verda concluded.

Olivia looked directly at me. "...Can we leave this to you?"

She was certain that I was the only one who could take this man down. She believed I could do it. And so—

"Please leave this to me."

I had no choice but to deliver on my promise.

"Ginny. Stand back with everyone."

"Okay." Ginny believed in me and conceded without argument.

With my friends now safely out of harm's way, I took a step forward.

"Should we begin?" I asked as I readied my sword, feet wide under me.

My enemy leaned forward in response.

"Very well—"

And then he charged.

As I expected, he was fast. Incredibly so. Before I knew it, his sword was gleaming right in front of me.

I could handle it. As his sword swung down on me, I jumped to the side, simultaneously casting an elemental attack spell. A host of circles appeared around Sergia, and an instant later, a maelstrom of sorcery raged around him.

Wind blades. Ice pillars. Fireballs. Rocks. Lightning. A deluge from all sides. This would normally end any average battle, but—

"Boring."

A hoarse voice. The following moment...Sergia's hand traced an elegant arc, flashing silver. He unleashed over a thousand slashes that struck the elemental spells...

"Olivia vel Vine is not the only one who specializes in *slicing*."

He sliced through my attacks, rendering them void.

This technique was Olivia's specialty. As someone who excelled only in wielding the sword, she had crafted a fang of her own—something unbeatable—to take on strong magical opponents. I had to wonder how Olivia felt about a demon weaponizing the same technique. It couldn't have been a good feeling, but I didn't have the luxury of pondering this too much.

By the time I thought, *Here he comes*, Sergia was upon me. We crossed swords—one, two, three times. As our weapons met, embers sparking, my mind raced.

He's strong.

This soldier was an excellent resource. As a demon, he had been born with incredible magic abilities, but he'd chosen to fight with just a sword. I could sense the obsession behind his aesthetics with every slice of his sword.

"...I suppose Alvarto's followers are more than talk."

At this stage, he had rendered my magic useless. Our battle turned into a clash of swords...but Sergia Nagan was more skilled in this field. I'd undoubtedly lose if I fought on his terms.

"The outcome of battle was decided before we even started... You said so yourself, *Your Highness*."

Despite figuring out my identity, Sergia looked unbothered. At the same time, he didn't seem to exhibit any pride in his own strength. He did not indicate that anything had stirred him during the battle.

There was only nothingness to him. A void. He was still and silent like the water's surface.

"I will take your head."

He was ready to deal the final blow. As soon as I felt this—

"Secret Sword Technique: Snake Twist."

Sergia's blade writhed, and the long sword in my own hand went flying up into the blue sky.

"!!"

Sensing danger, I jumped back as far as I could and felt something graze past me. As soon as I landed, my eyes darted down to look at my stomach.

...If I had jumped back even a second later, my guts would have splattered on the ground. There was a single rip across my shirt, and blood seeped from my skin.

Anyone with eyes could see that I was in trouble, which got the demons buzzing.

"So close!"

"He's basically done for."

"He's got no sword, either. Ard Meteor doesn't have a leg to stand on."

"I mean, he can't use magic without it. He's totally helpless."

"I knew Sergia could take down Ard Meteor."

Everyone was confident of Sergia's victory, anticipating my imminent death. Everyone except...

Olivia. Ginny. Sylphy. Verda.

None of my friends held a hint of despair in their eyes or expressions. Dire as things appeared, they didn't doubt I would win.

I, too, was confident in my abilities.

"I recognize your powers. However—"

I wasn't scared about being empty-handed. I looked at my opponent.

"Your sword has strength and *nothing more*—it's a skill that's been finessed through your obsession with aesthetics. Sergia Nagan. Your blade—it has no heart."

I extended my right hand toward him and curled my index finger toward me. *Come hither.*

Sergia recognized on the cue. He leaned forward, shouldering his blade—and kicked up a whirlwind as he rushed forward.

In the span of a second, he had closed the space between us. Now that I'd lost Verda's sword, I'd become just a villager—helpless in every sense. Sergia seemed to pick up on this. He, however, didn't let his guard down in his mission to kill me. He wasn't about to trip up now. Even at the very last moment—even with victory practically in the palms of his hands—nothing had washed over his heart. He was, without a doubt, a warrior to be reckoned with.

However...

"A blade without heart is a blade that elicits no fear."

Sergia and I both made our move. I could only make out a gleam of something.

The brightness of his bare blade was blinding. My body—as a typical nobody—was at its limit. I couldn't possibly counter the flash of my enemy's blade.

But...I was going to move. I had to. After all, I had something that allowed me to go far beyond the limits of this mortal body.

And that was my heart—the power of it.

I would save my friends. I would save the world. I would save Ireena. I was breaking past these bounds with my sense of purpose and sincerity.

I stopped the enemy blade aimed straight at my head by grabbing it with a hand.

“You stopped it...?! With a bare hand...?!”

This was the first time Sergia’s heart stirred. It was here that the battle was decided. I refused to let this opportunity pass me by, carrying out the best plan I could under the circumstances.

I swung my right leg up—and brought it down on him in a high kick.

A disappointingly simple but fascinatingly violent move. The force of my attack came down on Sergia’s head.

“——Ngh!”

That quick moan ended everything. The light faded from his eyes and he dropped to the ground with a heavy thud. Silence filled the air. The demons—leisurely spectators until now—broke out in a cold sweat.

“Y-you gotta be kidding...!”

“Impossible...! There’s no way that he beat Sergia with his bare hands...!”

“He’s a monster! What do we do now...?!”

Gone were their high spirits.

As they appraised me, I looked around at each of them. “Shall we continue?”

They trembled from head to toe. None had the will to fight left.

“Shit!”

“I ain’t throwin’ my life away here...!”

“We have to back down...!”

Like dogs with their tails between their legs, the demons fled. Soon, we were the only ones left.

“I knew you could do it, Ard!” Ginny cried.

“I knew you could do it—obviously!” Sylphy added. “I mean, I put my trust in you, after all!”

“...Hmph,” Olivia muttered.

“You sure are an interesting one! Let me dissect you once all this is over!” Verda said.

I smiled at their praise.

“Let us get going. It’s time we turned things around,” I said, pointing at the lab—barrier and all.



Soon after Verda released the seals, we entered the grounds of the research lab.

The exterior had Verda's brand of weird eccentricity all over it, but the interior was surprisingly normal. As we passed through the hallway, I remained alert and checked for danger around the corners. Things got very dangerous when you thought you were in the clear. It's the time when everyone starts to drop their guard.

I was worried the enemy would use that moment to strike...but my fears were unfounded. We progressed through the lab without incident and arrived at a spacious room.

"Oh...it's quite impressive..." Ginny marveled.

The room was evidently used to develop magical tools and equipment and conduct experiments. The right side of the room was neatly lined with workbenches and everything necessary for production. The left was reserved for experiments. Physical barriers were set up everywhere, presumably out of caution.

"All righty! Let's get cookin'!"

Thrilled to be back on her own turf, Verda skipped over to one of the workbenches, where she opened a knapsack and lined up several ingredients on the desk...

"Oh, right. The whole town might go bye-bye while I'm working, but we can worry about that later. Just think of it as a stroke of bad luck and move on!"

And with that worrisome warning, Verda set to work.

Not long after, we managed to avoid the worst-case scenario, and the magic devices we'd set our hopes on were completed. They looked like very basic silver bracelets. Their purpose, however...was to restore our magic. You had to be wearing the bracelet for it to be effective, but the user would be able to use spells again.

"Okey dokey. Let's test these babies out and see if they work!"

We moved over to the experiment area on the left side of the room, extended our palms toward the air, and cast a spell. As for the results—

"Stellar, it seems."

"Now I won't be dead weight...!" Ginny's spirits soared.

"Ahhhh! Demise! I'll never let you go again!" Sylphy could once again summon her Holy Sword.

Olivia was never one for magic, so she didn't have much of an opinion. At any rate, we'd just taken a giant step closer to our final objective.

"Ever since the world transformed, we've been like wild mice running from cats, under constant fear of death. But that all ends today. From now on, we will be the hunters."

Everyone nodded at my statement, morale high.

"We'll rescue Miss Ireena...!"

"We'll make 'em so mad, they explode!"

"For my pupils...and my potato field. I will save them."

"Games are all about winning! And we're the underdogs!"

Their faces beamed with hope. I felt the same way. Now we had nothing to fear. We would push straight ahead and save the world. It was our sole objective.

"Okay then—," I said, rallying together my trusted friends...

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap...

A noise echoed.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap.

Was that applause I heard?

Someone was clapping. It wasn't me. Or Ginny. Or Sylphy. Or Olivia. Or Verda.

Someone else was here.

As soon as this realization hit me...

A chill ran through our group.

Pores opened up, making us slick with sweat. We stood there, frozen.

I knew I was supposed to be taking note of our surroundings, but I found that I couldn't even move my head. My fingers involuntarily trembled. Sweat beaded on my face.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap.

The sound was growing closer. Someone was approaching. At the same time, a cacophonous chorus started ringing in my head—something unpleasant like a string instrument being violently plucked. My mind was

losing its grip on reality. I couldn't think straight with this sickening noise. Composure left me. I was led deeper into a trance.

—It was fear.

We were being driven into a state of overwhelming fear.

But who? Who was it? Who in this world could fill everyone, myself included, with such terror?

...The truth was, I knew who it was. There was only one person who could do this.

But I rejected the idea. I told myself that it was impossible and banished the thought. There was no way that *he* had returned. He mustn't be allowed to return. And besides, didn't we seal him away back then?

With the Heavenly Kings and their subordinates, we had already taken our *revenge*. Revenge against the monster who had stolen our loved ones from us. Revenge against the monster who had stolen our dignity. Revenge against the beast who was the sworn enemy of all creation.

After all that, there was no way he could ever return—

“Engaging in escapism? That’s not like you, honey.”

As soon as I heard the sudden whisper, a darkness blew in like a storm.

“It can’t be...!”

“This nasty feeling...!”

“This is bad.”

“What’s happening...?!”

A dark aura stormed around us. It finally gathered at one point, converged together—

—and descended upon us.

As silence fell over the room, *he* appeared before us.

“...Impossible,” I breathed.

I was helpless to do anything but stand dumbfounded. My mind was blank.

“...Impossible,” I repeated like a fool.

This was never supposed to happen... The man, the monster before my

eyes, was exactly as I remembered him.

A small body, short and childlike. His clothes were odd, not attributable to any particular era or country. His appearance suggested one who was truly alone and independent.

His features were angelic, those eyes twinkling to an unsettling degree. His long, silky black hair flowed down to the floor... He was nauseatingly beautiful—a nightmare in human form.

As soon as he noticed my reaction, his lips curled into a twisted grin. He spoke in a tone repulsively eloquent.

“See? We meet again.”

It was like we were continuing from *where we left off*. I never thought this day would come, yet now he stood before me.

The old war. The final battle of the ancient past—the one between humanity and the Evil Gods.

He had left me with one last thing: “*I won’t become a memory.*”

I’d assumed he was being a sore loser. That was what I wanted to think.

I wanted to believe I was finally rid of him for good.

And yet...!

Shit! Dammit!

Rage bubbled in me—breaking through my agitation.

Olivia—my sister figure—was grappling with the same emotion.

I was sure Sylphy and Verda were, too. The only exception was Ginny, who was from the modern era.

Everyone from the ancient past felt the same sick animosity as we spat the name of our sworn enemy.

“Mephisto Yuu Phegor...!”

CHAPTER 84

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Greatest Psycho

Long, long ago—a time known as “the ancient past.” Certain beings ruled all of creation.

The Outer Ones.

Back then, this had been their *main title*.

Higher powers—the Outer Ones—controlled the ancient world and created the heightened beings known as “demons” in the image of humankind. Our overlords were intolerant of the creatures called humans, as the majority were oppositional and resistant to their regime. Hence, I formed a rebel army with Olivia and my comrades and fought an ongoing battle to expel our masters...

To tell you the truth, however, I never considered them to be pure evil. I found that some of them had extended their hands to humankind. And these were just some rare exceptions to the rule—many had gone so far as to create utopias, places without rampant discrimination toward humans, and they made model rulers in the political sphere.

Their collective might have wronged humankind, but they worked independently, driven by their own convictions. Though the Outer Ones were the enemy, many felt they should give credit where it was due.

Of all the Outer Ones, there was one creature unlike any other.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

That devil held no beliefs. His actions were not bound to any form of logic...and were repulsive above all else.

Even if you condensed every ounce of evil in this world, it wouldn't compare to him.

On a whim, Mephisto could smugly save anyone—humans, demons, gods—or spit in their faces with laughter and kill them. He was evil incarnate.

This was how he earned the name Evil God.

Yes, the original title was his alone.

In the modern bible, one of the heroic ballads of the Demon Lord uses Evil Gods as a blanket term to refer to the Outer Ones—

But to me, that title belonged to just one being.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

In my opinion, no one else was worthy of this name.

There wasn't a single person who didn't loathe him in the ancient past, not one among humans, demons, or gods. All of creation despised him—resented him, tried to rid themselves of him. I was no exception. Neither were my subordinates or comrades: Olivia. Verda. Alvarto. Lizer—the Four Heavenly Kings. The high officials in the Council of Seven. Rivelg, the knight of roses... All the heroes of old. Ordinary soldiers who hadn't made names for themselves. We all shared the same sentiment. That included the Champion Army led by Lydia.

In particular...Lydia resented Mephisto more than anyone else.

Mephisto had killed her beloved mother...

And he was also her biological father.

We would never know how much this knowledge had anguished Lydia—the knowledge that they shared the same blood. Until the very end of Lydia's life, Mephisto had been a menace to her—a walking nightmare.

And not just to her. He was a nightmare for all of us. That was why we were willing to sacrifice anything to eliminate him.

I had gotten comfortable, relieved to know he would never exist in this world again.

...And yet...that nightmare had come to life once more.

"Ngh...!" The grinding of teeth. It echoed quietly.

Olivia and Verda stood next to me. Sylphy was directly behind me. It was impossible to keep calm with the monster staring us down.

As all eyes laid on him, Mephisto did the unimaginable—

"Oh dear. This worked out to my calculations, but I can't stop myself from tearing up."

His eyes misted like he was reuniting with an old friend—his closest friend in the world.

...Emotions beat against my heart—annoyance and nausea. Tension.

Unbridled rage.

...Ginny was the only one who'd never had the misfortune of meeting Mephisto before. She remained fearful yet calm.

“‘Mephisto’...? Isn’t that the name of the Evil God that the Demon Lord sealed away in an eternal prison...? How are you here...?”

Ginny remained composed enough to ask questions. Her psyche was cold, stoic. This question triggered all our brains to start racing.

“It was Lizer...! He used the Strange Cube...!”

Sylphy was probably right.

Whenever Lizer found himself in a tough spot, he always turned to strange schemes. I knew his logic was that he wouldn’t break free from a stalemate until he came up with a plan that went beyond his foe’s logical faculties.

And I had to give it to him: This was how he’d overcome his other predicaments, which had convinced him to do something *this stupid*.

“Lizer...! I didn’t think he was such an idiot...!” Olivia snarled, speaking what was in my mind.

I see. This has to be one of his weirdest schemes. I can’t say we saw this coming.

Who would have thought? Who would have guessed he’d turn to something that was basically suicide? I’d bet everything that Lizer had made sure to prepare for the worst before reviving Mephisto, devising some sort of plan to keep him in check.

...Pathetic.

I mean, Mephisto was an Evil God, for crying out loud! Even the Demon Lord had been no match for him—not to mention the Champion. It was impossible to control a monster.

“*Phew...* I think I’ve calmed down now. Sorry for falling apart on you.”

Mephisto smiled and narrowed his golden eyes as he took a look around.

Then he turned to Verda, speaking to her with great affection. “These inventions on display—marvelous. *My darling pupil*. It seems you threw all my lessons in the trash. But I think that’s what makes you special.”

“...Are you planning on breaking my toys again, teacher?”

It was rare to see Verda with a flash of anger—dark, terse—crossing her face.

Mephisto smiled. “Hmm. Well, as you might have guessed, I currently

serve as Lizer's pawn. But for the little teacher's pet, I guess I could make an exception if you don't want your feelings to get hurt—"

His smile was angelic, like a holy mother.

"—Then I'll have to break you first."

Sirens blared in my head.

"Verda!" I screamed.

Do something, Verda! I prayed...but it was all in vain.

A jet-black spear appeared beneath Verda's feet, and...

"Ah..."

...its tip impaled her petite body, puncturing her through.

"Isn't this great? Now you don't have to feel bad about anything ever again," he said, a devilish smile on his divine face.

"*Mephistoooooooooooooooo!*" Olivia cried, frenzied in anger.

She whipped out her magic blade, closing in on him, preparing to cleanly slice through him—

"Boooring. As always."

Just as she was about to land the blow, Olivia's body shot through the air.

"Gah...?!"

She slammed into a wall, then slid down to the ground, slumped over, unmoving.

What had happened to her? What did Mephisto do?

It was too fast for my eyes to catch it.

"Fighting fire with fire? You're so predictable. It bores me... And that attack just now? What do you have to say for yourself? I could yawn three times in the time it took you to come at me."

His lips were in the shape of a smile, but those eyes were cold like ice.

He turned to me. "Well? What will you do now, honey?"

Terror coursed through me as I launched my attack—one of pure instinct, no thought behind it.

I realized I'd unleashed a barrage of elemental magic. It was charged with everything that was in me. No mercy, no holding back. No way.

I was going berserk before the definitive threat in front of me.

The storm of destruction submerged him, causing major damage to anything in its vicinity. A localized attack but sufficient in strength. No one was safe. Nothing could save him.

—And yet...

“You disappoint me, honey,” Mephisto whispered sadly.

Then...it all vanished—gone was my magic vortex.

He hadn’t utilized any special powers. No, Mephisto had merely waved both hands as if clearing away the smoke around him. That was all it took to cancel out all my effort.

“Ah—this is so foul.”

His petite body radiated something pure black, as if reacting to his mental state.

We couldn’t dodge it. Even reacting proved to be impossible. His aura washed over Ginny, Sylphy, and me, casting us into a corner of the room.

A sharp pain shot through my body when my back slammed into the wall. Just as I fell face-first on the ground...

“Time is a cruel mistress.”

Mephisto kicked me, violently digging his foot into my shoulder. A David in size, Goliath in strength. I couldn’t move an inch.

Mephisto pouted as he stared at me coldly. “You’re so uncoordinated now, honey.”

And then I felt something flowing into me. Something terrible from his toes. An inauspicious energy coursed through me.

“A-argh...!” I cried out in agony.

If the pain was only physical, I was confident that I could bear it. But this...this gnawed, corroded—destroyed my astral spirit. It was indescribable.

“Gaaaah...!”

I was going to disappear. Forever.

But there was nothing I could do. So long as he kept his foot on me, I couldn’t stop him.

...Was this the end of my life? My heart pounded, cold with fear; my teeth were chattering.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Sylphy shot toward Mephisto, wielding her Holy Sword, Demise-Argis. A perfect ambush. As soon as her foe was in range, Sylphy aimed for his neck, thrusting the tip at him. However—

“Oh dear, that was close.”

He waltzed away from her. The Holy Sword sliced through empty air, failing to catch a single cell on Mephisto.

We were now far apart. Sylphy stood in front of me, taking a protective

stance, and stared down the enemy.

“That’s enough outta you!”

I could already sense that this gallant knight...was in imminent danger.

“Syl...phy...!”

Don’t do it. You can’t go up against him. Run. Take Ginny...and run...!

I wanted to scream at her, but I couldn’t. The psychic damage had taken my voice from me.

And time wouldn’t wait for us.

Sylphy glared at the enemy, valiant and brave.

“Heh-heh-heh.” Mephisto chuckled to himself quietly.

“...What’s so funny?” Sylphy knit her eyebrows together.

Mephisto stifled his laughter. “Little Sylphy, right? You’re one of the pupils my daughter raised as her own. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, so wh—?”

“And yet...you were nowhere to be found during *the time that mattered most.*”

Sylphy trembled slightly.

“She’d loved you more than anyone else. You meant the world to her. But you weren’t even there—nowhere to be found as she was on the verge of death. Why was that, little Sylphy?”

A smile, a terrible one, broke across Mephisto’s face. He struggled to suppress his laughter, continuing to torment her.

“You might have been able to prevent that tragedy from unfolding—been able to save her from my brainwashing. Her best friend—my honey—couldn’t say anything to help, but you—her de facto family—might have succeeded. Oh well... You just weren’t there.”

Mephisto knew his words would burrow deep inside her psyche. That was why he was smiling.

“You’d disappeared as your mother lay dying...and yet, you continue to act the part of the savior... Heh-heh-heh... Do you think you can protect your friends? Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh... Oh, you’re funny—pathetic, pitiful. A little fool. Oh—”

Mephisto’s shoulders twitched as he looked at her with utter disdain.

“—You have no right to put on airs; you brought misfortune upon your

pain rushed through me, a living hell.

However, it was nothing compared to the agony of losing a precious friend.

“*Private Kingdom!*” I chanted the incantation and cast my killer move without a moment’s hesitation.

As soon as my spell manifested, I entered Stage III of Brave Demon Full Body. It was the best I could do—battle-wise—in my current condition. In exchange for the unimaginable power it bestowed on me, it placed my body under an indescribable strain...crushing my skin and bones beneath its pressure. But if that meant I could take on the monster, I would do it.

I focused everything into the black blade that manifested in my hand—

“Ah. You look best like this, honey—”

I didn’t know what happened.

The last thing I remember was his revolting smile. After that, nothing.

I found myself lying on the floor. My black sword shattered to pieces.

My *Original* had been canceled.

“Ngh...!”

I couldn’t move. Not even a single finger.

“That’s right, honey. This world is absurd—extremely so.”

He was smiling...yet tears streamed down his face.

“Ah, so it’s true. This world has turned upside down. I guess my beloved honey is nowhere to be found now. I thought I remembered you being much stronger. More passionate. More overwhelming. And far, far more terrifying — And this is you now?”

Mephisto held out his left hand. A magic circle—flashing pure white—appeared in his palm.

“I’m so disappointed, honey—so disappointed, in fact, that I’m ready to say good-bye forever.”

An inky orb peeked out from the circle.

“I’ve decided that after I kill you, I’ll kill myself, too. Bye-bye.”

Tears of sorrow streamed down his cheeks, which were taut from his cheerful smile.

Without any hesitation, Mephisto prepared to seal my fate.

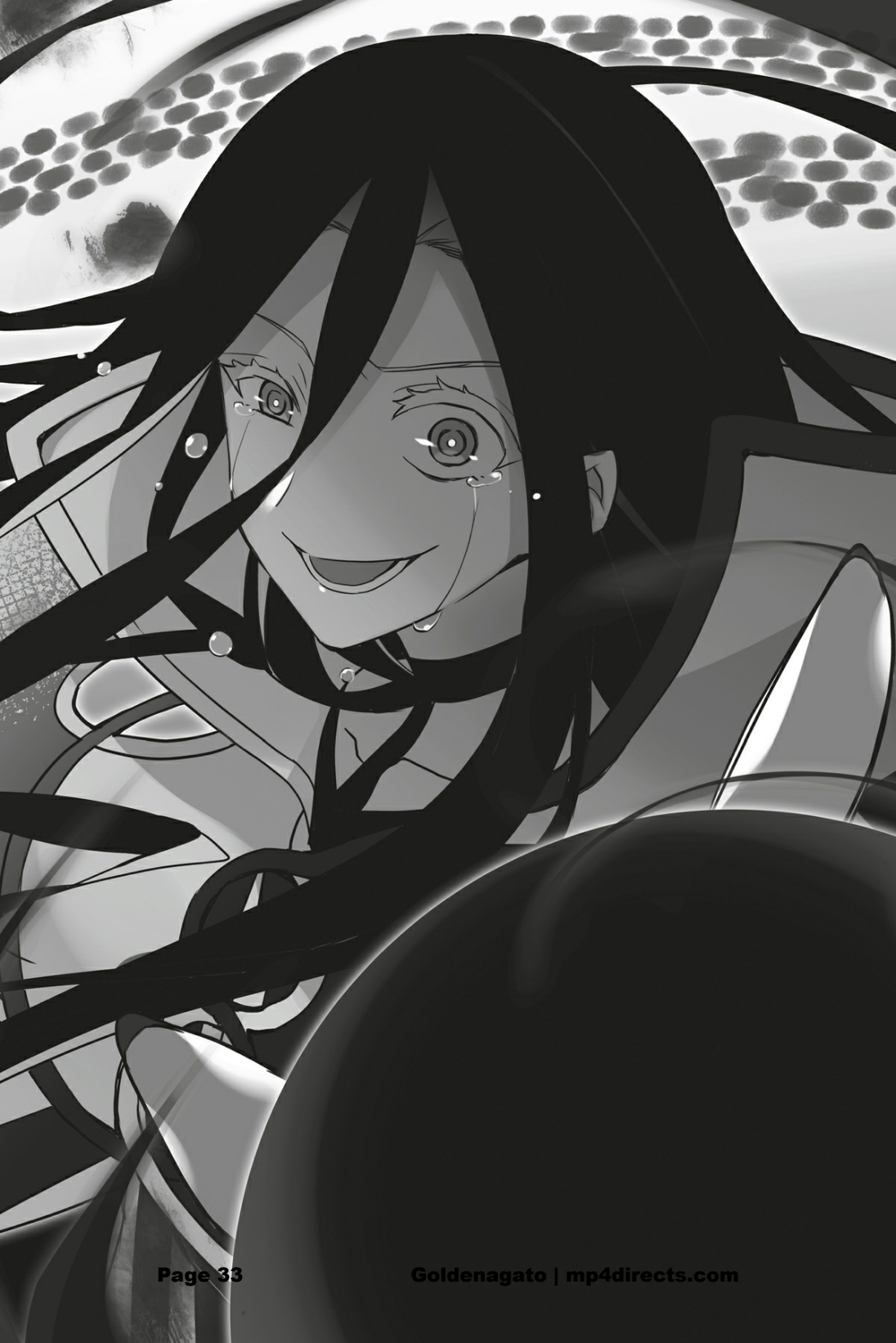
Then—the dark orb came at me.

“Gwagh...!”

As I predicted, my body remained immobilized. I would take the hit—directly.

—I was going to die.

I was scared. But not about dying. I was terrified I’d end my life’s journey without saving anyone.



“Iree...na...!”

I’m sorry, Ireena. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I couldn’t save you. Forgive me for being weak.

Tears trailed down my face.

This is it, huh.

Accepting my fate, I closed my eyes.

Then—

“Ard!”

My ears rang when someone shrieked. Ginny.

I could feel her presence, her body movements. My eyes snapped open on instinct.

And...I caught a glimpse of Ginny running over and standing in front of me protectively. The dark orb closed in on her—

“Ah.”

And then it exploded.

The orb combusted as soon as it made contact, becoming a ball of black flames, smoke billowing around Ginny.

She yelped quietly—and the fire scorched her skin...until she collapsed in front of me.

“Agh...!” My body shook. My teeth rattled.

Ginny.

Ginny. Ginny. Ginny. Ginny. Ginny.

“Ginny...!”

Wake up. Come on—open your eyes. Please. Don’t die on me. You can’t die. You can’t...!

“Ginnyyy...!”

I was powerless to do anything except beg—sobbing.

...On the other hand...

“I wasn’t expecting that.”

That devil. His angelic face regarded Ginny with a look of surprise, eyes wide.

“How’d that happen? She should have been rendered immobile. Even if she could move, she couldn’t have made it in time to stop my attack. How did she do it? What pushed her beyond her mortal limits? Oh, what? What-what-what-what-what—?”

His golden eyes darted back and forth like a pendulum. He mumbled to

himself.

Finally, he seemed to reach a conclusion. “Ah, I see. It’s love—the power of love.”

He clapped his hands together...and smiled—a saintly one, abundantly kind.

“I take back what I said, sweet Ginny. You’re not a pathetic caterpillar—you’re an exceptional resource with great qualities.”

Mephisto’s cheeks flushed red as if he was blushing. He spread his arms wide, throwing his head back to stare up at the ceiling.

“Thank you. You’ve caught my interest and given me a great idea to amp up the drama... Hee-hee. Right now, I suppose I’m on cloud nine, as they say.”

Mephisto twirled around, doing a small dance before skipping toward me.

...I’d been rendered completely powerless. I couldn’t hold a sword. I couldn’t form a fist. I couldn’t do anything. I just had to let it happen.

Mephisto cradled my face in both hands. “I’ve changed my mind, honey. It’s unfortunate how you’ve changed...but I can go along with it—stoop to your level. Then we can play again. Just like the old days.”

He planted a kiss on my forehead and whispered to me like a maiden in love.

“It’s me versus you all—the one who wants to stage a dramatic play and those who want to stop it. Ah, I can’t wait! I just know it’s going to be a ball.”

Then Mephisto said, “See you later. I love you, honey.”

His face, cherubic. The devil winked out of sight. All that remained were his victims.

We lay there like corpses, unable to move.

...I managed to hold on to my consciousness, but my condition was dire.

“Gngh...!” I choked. Tears—globes of them, sticky—rolled down my cheeks.

The reality before us—the truth I didn’t want to accept—had given rise to a feeling of immeasurable regret.

...I had lost. We had failed. In every possible way.

That much was clear.

Mephisto has cast us into the pit of despair and left us there. He hadn’t stopped at dealing us physical and psychic damage—he’d obliterated any

hope for the future.

...*Crack.*

An echoing sound. His parting gift.

With his departure, Mephisto had snapped each of our bracelets, breaking the sole means of returning our magic.

I would have managed to keep it together if we were just at square one. But we had to keep fighting...after losing it all—magic, a means to fight. We had no choice.

I wept, consciousness dimming, hacking like I'd consumed molten lead.

“Is there no hope for us...?!”

CHAPTER 85

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Twist

My consciousness was hazy at best. All I could manage was to stare at my fallen friends from my place on the ground.

Ginny, skin scorched. Olivia, crumpled against a wall. Sylphy, eyes closed as if asleep, tucked in beyond the gaping hole.

And—Verda, suspended in midair, spear puncturing through her.

Her fingers twitched.

“Ngh... Ah! Up and at ’em!”

She hadn’t stirred before this. I would have thought this was a joke, seeing her springing into the air, hands wrapped right around the spear. Yanking herself free from the weapon, she landed on her feet—the puncture wound on her stomach starting to heal before us.

“To borrow my teacher’s words, that went as expected,” Verda remarked with a sigh.

I guess she was playing dead, waiting for her chance to strike.

“*Sigh*. He didn’t give me any chances to step in. Bummer.”

Verda shrugged and scanned the room—taking in the damage done to the space and her friends before sighing again.

“It’s his MO: breaking my precious toys with a smile.” Verda’s permanent smile was gone, her expression darkening with rage. “This is why we can’t be together.”

Anger. Pity. I could see her battling against emotions that never really broke through the surface.

But it was only for a moment. She took a deep breath, calming herself. The old Verda was back again.

“All right! Let’s get crackin’ and fix you all up!”

I was relieved to see her back to her cheerful self.

Everyone was going to be okay. I was blessed to have an ally like Verda.

Now there was no need for me to cling to consciousness anymore. I left

everything to Verda and closed my eyes—

—I fell into sleep almost instantly, shifting consciousness.

As if he'd been waiting to infiltrate my dreams, there *he* was, stepping into my mental territory.

The dreamscape had to be his doing: black sun in the crimson sky, land barren with no plant life in sight, clusters of rock formations.

There in this vista was one round table. I lowered myself down to take a seat, glaring at the being across from me—Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

“And why do you look like that? Is this a joke to you?”

I realized I was being stupid as soon as I asked this of him.

Everything was a joke to this monster.

I wouldn't last if I was ticked off by his insistence that he talk to me in *the body of a gorgeous woman* from the neck down.

“I always think to myself: What's life without a little humor?”

“...So this is what you find amusing?”

“Hee-hee. I also thought I'd give you a little something to get you excited.”

He squeezed his breasts together, emphasizing them. I didn't feel the slightest hint of desire—only irritation.

“Hmm. You don't seem pleased. I was so sure you'd like that my face is identical to the two people you love most.”

“*The two people you love most.*” Lydia and Ireena.

...He really did remind me of them. That's what made this so unpleasant.

“...I have no intention of playing around with you. I'm not wasting any time here if you just want to make small talk.”

“Someone's impatient. You should relax, you know, stretch your legs—ah, sorry. Come on. Don't go.” Mephisto held me back with his hand. “I entered your dreams to explain the *rules*. I meant to tell you when I left, but things were getting a little tense and I forgot.”

...Mephisto always treated these incidents like they were some sort of game. He didn't care if I wanted to play or not; he'd force his restrictions on me and talk over me anyway. It was all part of being an Evil God.

“These rules aren't very complicated—just a few of them, simple ones.

First, power ceilings. It sucks that none of you can weaponize your true strength right now. So I'll give you an advantage. I won't use more power than what you can handle."

Aggressively condescending. But I didn't have the luxury of nitpicking.

I urged him to continue, hoping to get this over with as soon as possible. "And the second?"

"A time limit. Things could get boring if we stretched it out, so you only have ten days—ten days to make your way *to Megatholium*. As long as you honor that, I don't care what else you do."

"...And those are the only rules?"

"Yep. We don't need any more. That should be more than enough to make this interesting," Mephisto said, smile repulsive. "I promise to follow my own guidelines and level the playing field. You're welcome to screw up any of my tricks, too."

It could go one of two ways: spot his plan and stop him from having fun or fail to pick up on his scheme and curse ourselves for our incompetence.

This was always the case with Mephisto's so-called games.

"Ah, but I must thank Lizer. After all, he's the reason I get to play with my honey again. Well, the way I see it, the plan has worked, and—"

"Are we done here? If so, I'm going back."

Mephisto shrugged when I stood from my chair.

And then his face broke into a wicked grin.

"I'll have you show me a face soaked in tears. *Just like before*." My enemy seemed to be confident.

I threw my shoulders back. "You'll be the one crying... *Just like before*."

This was the last exchange I would have with him in my dreams.

—As I came to my senses and opened my eyes...

"Ah, you're finally awake!"

"...Are you hurt?"

"*Phew*. You slept like the dead. I was sure we lost ya."

My friends were looking down at me. I'd apparently given them a fright.

I apologized to them and sat up. Then I saw her.

"Ginny..."

Like Sleeping Beauty, she lay on the floor, eyes shut, skin pale—no signs of life.

“We were all only dealing with external injuries... But Ginny’s astral spirit has corroded. And that can only be healed with magic.”

“...Then we’ll have to hurry and get it back,” I answered.

Everyone nodded. Verda, particularly vigorously.

“Right. If we don’t get a move on, the damage will be permanent. Seeing how her condition is deteriorating...I’d say we have ten days.”

It was no coincidence, I imagined, that this lined up with the time limit imposed by Mephisto’s game.

“...Our initial goal was to obtain the Strange Cube and rescue Ireena. We have no choice but to delay that for now,” I stated.

We would recover our magic and heal Ginny within ten days. Then... we’d go to Megatholium and defeat Mephisto Yuu Phegor. No one raised any objections.

I continued. “The issue now...is how to get back our magic. Does anyone have any ideas?”

Silence. Everyone crossed their arms and shook their heads. My mind raced—

“There *is* one way,” Olivia began quietly.

Oddly enough, I was thinking the exact same thing. It was a gamble—all or nothing.

“The Armor of the Demon Lord. If we use that, then maybe—”

SIDE STORY

The Failure, Unsatisfied

For as long as he could remember, Lizer Bellphoenix felt like there was something missing from his heart.

It was always unsatisfied, lacking in something.

That was why his existence seemed gray.

All others thrived in their wonderful world, vibrant, and praising their lives. Meanwhile, he trudged forward, eyes downcast.

The elderly man found his existence frustrating. He was jealous of everyone else. And so he continued to search—to discover what he was missing.

He'd imagined he would be able to join in once he found it, to shake free from his boring life and loneliness, to live a full life. But...he didn't know *what* he was supposed to find.

Which meant he was doomed to a life that left him feeling eternally unfulfilled—sheer agony. Those decades spent wandering were a personal hell.

At the end of the long road, Lizer Bellphoenix—seventy-six, past the prime of his life—had finally learned his heart's desire. The indescribable could be described at last. It was the thing he had wanted for all those years...

It was love.

He'd arrived at this conclusion when he met the young orphan Maria.

Lizer had come to live a good life at the orphanage since the day she'd saved him as he lay dying on the street.

“Wow, look at all this food!”

“And the meat...!”

“And the veggies—so fresh!”

It was evening, and the dinner table at the orphanage had been set with a plentiful bounty. This was not a sight that you’d expect to see. The orphanage was in desperate financial straits, and the children were always starving. But now...they had Lizer, who spent his days earning money to buy food for Maria and the other children.

“You should have seen Lizer today! He took down a giant dragon with his bare hands!” Maria exclaimed, singing his praises as she relished the feast.

“Seriously?!”

“Doesn’t surprise me!”

“No hogging him, Maria! It’s not fair! We wanna go on a quest with Lizer, too!”

Maria had an affinity for magic, which was why she served as Lizer’s assistant, despite her age. He intended to introduce magic to the other children once they were old enough. If they became adventurers, they would never have to worry about money again.

“You’re such a blessing, Lizer.”

“How can we ever repay you...?”

“We really have nothing to offer...”

The orphanage caretakers expressed their gratitude.

Lizer shook his head. “No need. I’m the freeloader. If anything, I should be doing this to you for providing me with sanctuary.”

He genuinely believed that. Lizer wasn’t looking for compensation. All he wanted was to be at Maria’s side.

He lived to bring joy to her and her friends.

He required nothing other than their smiles.

After dinner and a bath, it was time for lights-out.

Before Lizer, the orphanage had no beds, let alone rooms for the children. But with his money, they had remodeled the building, providing them with their own rooms and expensive beds to guarantee a good night’s sleep.

Nighttime. Lizer’s nightly ritual was to read picture books out loud in Maria’s room. It was a great opportunity for her to improve her reading comprehension and for them to spend time together.

“And Kaiser the Champion bellowed, ‘I carry the people’s hope! They

give me my strength!”” Lizer read with emotion.

He used to be terribly monotone, but he’d become a much better actor under Maria’s guidance. Now he recited these lines with the eloquence of a thespian.

“The monster howled—‘Aaaaaaaargh! No one told me you were so strooooong!’”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Lizer, your face is too funny!”

Never in his life had he used his facial muscles before. Since meeting Maria, Lizer’s range of expression seemed to expand by the day.

Maria started to doze off. On any other day, they would have exchanged their good nights and called it an evening. On this day, however, Maria did something unexpected.

“...Hey, Lizer. Why can’t this world be like the ones in my picture books?”

He couldn’t tell if her narrowed eyes were from drowsiness...or sorrow.

She pressed on. “If I can be reborn, I’d want to be a Saint. Then I’d join the Champions and create a wonderful world for everyone.”

Her tiny voice broke Lizer’s heart. Why was she saying this now? He was certain that it had something to do with what had happened on their way home during their last quest. After collecting the reward and picking up some groceries, they had come across the corpse of a child on the side of the road.

“...I wonder if we’ll all end up like that, too.”

Maria appeared on the verge of tears. Lizer held her tightly.

He went nearly blind with rage toward the people who hurt her...or perhaps more accurately, with the state of the world they lived in.

“A wonderful world where everyone can smile and live in peace. If that’s your wish...”

I want to grant it, he thought to himself.

For a world that let her smile, one where she would never feel sadness.

From that day forward, Lizer had a new goal in life, and then one day...he found a way to make Maria’s dream a reality.

In recent days, there had been rise in a certain movement challenging society...a rebel army led by Varvatos. Lizer instantly realized that would be the quickest path to his goal.

There was possibility in the strength possessed by Varvatos and his subordinates. For Maria’s ideal world to take form, they would need to drive

out the demons and Outer Ones. Only when humanity was free of their clutches could a true utopia exist.

And so Lizer decided to join Varvatos's army, rationalizing that borrowing their powers was the key to realizing Maria's dreams.

He would strike when the iron was hot. Lizer wasted no time relaying his plan to everyone.

This was a period when the orphanage was stocked, and he'd finished teaching the children about magic. They didn't need him anymore—they were self-sufficient, able to maintain their current lifestyle without him.

The caretakers regretted seeing him go, but they didn't resist—not even with a single word. The children, on the other hand, were fiercely opposed. To them, he was a respected teacher and de facto grandfather.

But Lizer's heart was set.

“...I know you'll be like a Champion, Lizer. I'm rooting for you.”

Maria gently urged him onto his path. Lizer was sure that she was pleased—that her utopia would come to life. That Lizer would make it happen.

He told himself he'd do anything to answer those hopes.

—Then came the faithful day.

It was days before Lizer was scheduled to leave. He didn't treat it any differently, accepting a quest, traveling into a dangerous area, and hunting down his prey—his daily routine.

Except Maria didn't accompany him on this day. They were planning to throw him a big good-bye party, so she had stayed back at the orphanage with the other children to set up.

“...I've really changed. I never thought I'd be sad about saying good-bye to anyone.”

The faces of Maria and the other children—smiling—flashed through his mind. Just the thought of leaving them hurt his heart, even though he knew it would be for only a short while.

But this wasn't good-bye forever. Once Lizer moved up the ranks, he'd eventually be granted his own land. Once that happened, he'd invite everyone to join him, and they could all live together again. The thought put a grin on his face.

This was Lizer's first real dream in his life. Lizer believed that he would build a glorious future for all of them—

His hopes, however, were shattered into a million pieces.

Lizer spotted something as he was returning to the orphanage with his reward. An impossible reality before his eyes.

It was a corpse—a body lying along the road.

Lizer gazed upon the beaten and battered figure.

His body shook uncontrollably.

“Maria...!”

Yes. The cadaver tossed by the roadside was the corpse of the person dearest to Lizer.

His mind went blank. Even he couldn't say how long he stood motionless.

Finally, Lizer retched. His stomach convulsed, his teeth rattled, his legs buckled under him.

Lizer collapsed to the ground. Crawling along the dirt, he approached Maria.

Once he confirmed her astral spirit was truly lost—he instinctively used magic to read the final memory stored in her body.

Shortly after Lizer had set out on his quest in the dangerous region, Maria had left the orphanage to visit an accessory shop. There, she purchased a pair of rings, one for Lizer, the other for her. It wasn't just to express her gratitude... It would serve to remind the two that their hearts would always be one.

“I hope he'll like it.”

Maria walked along the road, her heart singing with hope and beating from nerves.

...She'd let her guard down.

As the girl rounded a corner, she ran into someone. A demon. A high-ranking one who ran the town.

His ugly face was colored with hate...and his hand reached down toward Maria.

—It was the memory that followed that psychologically broke Lizer.

He found himself sobbing uncontrollably, howling, half mad with insurmountable grief.

Finally, he staggered back toward the orphanage. His mind couldn't accept this as his reality. He told himself the corpse wasn't Maria's. As soon as he got back to the orphanage, she'd be there waiting for him with a smile.

Lizer imagined her face, trudging on to his destination—

But that was where he would confront something more disturbing.

The orphanage was burning.

His second home was red. A group was going wild in front of it.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Serves 'em right!”

“And that's for living large!”

“The day of judgment has come! Burn, snobs!”

It was a group of humans. The bodies of the children were at their feet.

They were kicking the corpses and smiling.

—He didn't remember what happened after that.

It was like crushing ants. No emotion behind it.

It didn't even feel like he was taking lives.

Lizer realized he was in a sea of blood.

“.....”

He was dripping with it. It streamed down his body. Lizer was drenched in blood like a wet rat, not even smelling the metallic stench of it hanging in the air. He continued to stare at the burning orphanage.

He was thinking about the part of his heart that had been missing—the blank space that had been filled with the love of Maria and the orphanage. Now, it was darkening with new emotions.

Disgust. Hatred for this world. Contempt toward the people who had massacred his dear ones. From that moment on, Lizer Bellphoenix strayed

from the path of humanity.

“All your regret, all your fear and resentment. I will avenge you.”

He set out, crimson footprints following him across the town.

His first order of business was the demon who had murdered Maria. He tore him limb from limb. After that, he put out the fire at the orphanage and killed anyone connected to the perpetrators.

The bitterness in Lizer’s heart remained.

I detest it. I detest it. I detest this world and the evil that overruns it. I detest it all.

And so he set out on a journey—one of carnage. Everywhere he went, Lizer spilled blood. Demon or human, it didn’t matter. He killed without hesitation anyone he deemed repulsive. This became his *raison d’être*, his reason for being.

A dark fire slowly burned away his soul. He relished this feeling. Bodies piled up around Lizer. He thought it was the only proper offering that he could give to the orphanage’s children; to Maria. Only the death throes of vermin would suffice.

Days, months, and years passed before Lizer came upon *a certain being*.

Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

He was one of the Outer Ones, known as the incarnation of pure evil. Even Lizer was aware of his power.

Lizer had no chance of victory. If he challenged an Outer One, he would die. And so he decided to make Mephisto his final target.

Lizer journeyed for several more years, his heart growing weary. In the end, grief had painted his heart black. Everything would end here. He didn’t care what happened next. Ready to face death, Lizer headed for his final target.

It was the dead of night when Lizer snuck into the courtyard of Mephisto’s palace.

He was there waiting for him. Eyes twinkled in the darkness. Mephisto Yuu Phegor welcomed Lizer.

“Hey there, Lizer. It’s about time you got here.”

This worried Lizer. It was like Mephisto had a read on his plans... In fact, Mephisto was speaking as if this was what he’d anticipated from the very beginning.

There’s no way.

“...Were you watching my travels?”

Mephisto. The monster. The devil.

He confirmed Lizer’s question with a dashing smile. “I know when, where, and how all my toys will be born. So yes, I was watching you, Lizer. I’ve been watching since you were a baby.”

If what he said was true, then...

“This was your doing. You caused this evil.”

Sure enough, Mephisto didn’t deny this, either.

“That’s right. I wanted to rattle your empty heart, so I destroyed your village. You didn’t even bat an eye—and that’s when you became special to me. You sparked my curiosity and made me wonder whether I could break a lifeless doll. I owe you one, Lizer.” His smile grew brighter.

On the other hand...a particular darkness spread across Lizer Bellphoenix’s old face, something darker than the abyss.

“...Were you the one who killed Maria—and burned everyone at the orphanage?”

“Well, yeah. Technically, all I did was nudge the people toward the path of darkness. I didn’t do anything directly—”

Lizer’s exhausted heart, crushed by sorrow...

...flooded with black tar—detestation.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!”

It was him. It was him.

It was him.

It was he who caused the heartache. He who burned down my loved ones I’d found at long last. He who took away my peace.

It was him. It was this man.

Lizer Bellphoenix recognized that Mephisto Yuu Phegor was the most evil man in the world. Mephisto was no longer an organic life-form. He was evil personified.

And so—if no one else, Lizer knew he had to destroy this creature, and this creature alone.

It would be to clear his hatred. To avenge Maria and the others, free them of regret.

—However...

“That’s it, Lizer. I wanted to see you make that face. Well, shall we head to the climax?”

He never stood a chance of winning. Lizer's inner world might change, but this fact would remain constant.

In a mere instant, he was hovering on the verge of death.

"Well, Lizer, relay my regards to Maria on the other side... Oh, wait. I guess that's not possible. I mean, her astral spirit was destroyed, after all, which means you'll never meet again. Heartbreaking! But...that's what makes things interesting."

Grief spread in Lizer's chest. He wept bitter tears.

His accursed enemy would live on and continue to do evil with a smile. The thought tore apart his soul.

"Curse you—and any path you take...!"

It infuriated Lizer that he could do nothing except spew curses.

—Then it was his final moment.

Mephisto prepared to release a dark orb from his palm...

"I'll take custody of that man's life."

Thunder clapped. A gust of wind blasted in front of him. Lizer's vision went black.

Then he was standing somewhere else entirely, a refined and furnished room. In the center...was a man in an opulent chair, wineglass in one hand and staring at him.

"That was a close one."

"...And you are?"

"Alvarto Egzex. We've never met, but you know my name, I presume?"

Lizer did recall that name. He'd heard Alvarto was a commendable man who had joined Varvatos's army despite being a demon. It was Alvarto who had apparently saved him. His ulterior motives were a mystery...but Lizer saw this as an opportunity.

"You said you'll take custody of my life?"

"Yes. Your existence is now in my hands."

"In that case...use it as you see fit."

"Oh? Are you saying you wish to become my subordinate and do my bidding?"

Lizer nodded. Of course, this wasn't the entire story. It was all to get

revenge against Mephisto.

He wouldn't be able to lay a scratch on the Evil God by himself, but if he joined forces with this man, played his cards right, and commanded Varvatos's army, his odds would no longer be zero.

And he would do anything if it meant sending Mephisto Yuu Phegor to hell.

He hid his true motives from this man. "I can be useful to you. It's not ego speaking but indisputable truth. Therefore—"

"No," Alvarto replied flatly, taking a sip from his glass.

Lizer glared as the man smirked at him. He had a question of his own. "Why not?"

"Your heart is painfully boring," Alvarto answered with careful deliberation as he swirled his wine. "Like a certain someone, I've been watching you, although I was unaware of your existence until recently. You're a villain who goes around killing indiscriminately—humans and demons. I wanted to see how you operated."

Crossing his legs and resting his chin on his hands, Alvarto looked directly at Lizer. "Your deeds were brilliantly executed with wild yet flawless precision, and you didn't show a hint of hesitation. And most importantly...I could feel your resentment. Watching you got me all worked up—but it still wasn't enough. Why is that, do you think?"

The answer had to be related to his previous statement that Lizer's heart was boring. But why? He had no clue.

Alvarto must have read the old man's mind; he took another sip of wine and elaborated.

"Your heart holds only hatred. There's no room for anything except evil. That just won't do. Any power born from that can only produce a dull blade of violence. It'll never reach *that* monster...and above all, it won't turn me on." Alvarto finished off his wine, rose from his chair, and pointed at Lizer's chest. "Gain some conviction, Lizer Bellphoenix. Let your own beliefs shine brighter than all else. That will complete your character and convince me you're a worthy subordinate."

"Conviction...?"

"Indeed. You have the ingredients needed to give it form. Think of all the loved ones you've lost. Remember the halcyon days. That's where your goals and beliefs are hidden. You can remain here as my guest until you find

them.”

A paternal smile broke out on Alvarto’s face.

Days, months, and years passed by. After a long bout of meditation, soul-searching, and ridding himself of hatred...Lizer Bellphoenix found his beliefs at last.

“I will build a paradise on earth. A world where no child will ever feel sadness. I will accomplish this by my own hand.”

For ages, he’d thought about unfulfilled wishes. The children’s. The caretakers’. Maria’s. All these thoughts were constantly running through his mind.

In the end, he discovered it boiled down to a utopia for children. Revenge wouldn’t make Maria or the other children happy. But if he created a world where no one met the same fates they did, wouldn’t everyone at last be free of their agony? Couldn’t they finally let go of their regret?

Lizer Bellphoenix would live to protect and nurture children and their future.

Justice would conquer evil.

Now he wasn’t an angry man. With a new goal, the imperfect man walked down the road ahead.

—And he never noticed the devil grinning behind him.



“...That dream again?”

Sunlight filtered through the curtains. Birds twittered. It was still early. Lizer sat up in bed and let out a tiny sigh.

“Anxiety, fear, and irritation... They certainly have a mind of their own.”

If he’d possessed nothing but conviction, if he was willpower personified, then maybe he wouldn’t be so afraid of greeting the present and facing tomorrow.

On the day he joined the Demon Lord’s army as Alvarto’s subordinate, Lizer was reborn as a living doll whose sole purpose was to follow his own moral code and create his utopia. He was confident he would live and die by this. However...

“The Strange Cube... An omnipotent tool of wish fulfillment... Who could ever resist its temptation...?”

In the beginning, Lizer was satisfied with creating his utopia.

But when he laid eyes on the Strange Cube, Maria’s face had flashed in his mind. Although he told himself such ridiculousness served no purpose... Lizer revived Maria. It might be more accurate to say he *reconstructed* her, however.

He knew it was all meaningless, but he wanted to see the girl once more. Upon bringing her back, Lizer’s days were filled with heartache.

“I must protect...this utopia...and Maria...and her happiness...”

This was why he had forced the devil to do his bidding. He had managed to have him under control.

His plan was proceeding as intended. There were no issues to speak of.

“...Brooding over details will do me no good.”

Lizer knew he desperately needed optimism right now. He just needed to believe everything was going his way. He would protect Maria’s paradise, bring her happiness, eliminate any threats to her dream—and keep that monster dancing in the palm of his hand.

And hadn’t he been successful until now?

Lizer sighed and brushed away the pessimism lurking within his heart.

“I can’t allow myself to be trapped by details. This is an auspicious day. I must celebrate properly.”

Lizer could see Maria’s future—blindingly bright—just up ahead. The people would revere her with smiles on their faces.

Today called for a fortuitous celebration.

—Today, Maria would become a Saint.



After activating the Strange Cube, the world had basically become a parallel universe.

In fact, it had split into two. Half of it was a human utopia with Lizer as its leader. The other half was a monster paradise controlled by Alvarto.

To explain how everything came to pass, Lizer had woven together a fake story that was strikingly similar to the one in the picture book he used to read

to Maria. This was no coincidence, of course. Lizer was trying to make fiction real—as a part of his desire to make the resurrected Maria the star of his narrative.

In this transformed world, Lizer was a king who only acted as a supporting character. His real role...was to stay in the background and act as the foil for the Champion and Saint.

But that suited Lizer just fine.

On this day, he would play his part and fulfill his dearest wish. From a high platform overlooking the central plaza of Megatholium that was now the holy capital of his human utopia, Lizer surveyed the crowd.

“As you may all know, we are at a disadvantage in our battle against the Demon Lord Alvarto! But there is no need to despair! God has cast blessings upon us!”

Lizer’s words stirred the very peculiar crowd—a group of all children.

There was no one beyond a certain age to be found. Everyone besides Lizer was exceedingly young. And he served as their king.

“Our salvation was predicted in the Holy Book! It speaks of a Champion and a Saint who appear when the threat of the Demon Lord looms over us! The Champion has yet to arrive... However...! I have found our Saint at last!”

Lizer stoked their excitement with his expressive gestures. Then he invited her to join him.

“Allow me to introduce our savior! The Holy Saint!”

His arms spread wide, Lizer beckoned the young girl behind him to come forward.

It was Maria. Her simple features were caked with makeup, her clothes as sublime as one might expect of a holy figure. Standing at center stage must have made Maria nervous. Her face was tight, her steps sluggish. She stood in front as instructed and revealed herself to the crowd.

There was an explosion of cheers.

“Holy Saiiiiiiiiiiiiiint!”

“Please save ussssss!”

Maria’s expression grew even stiffer, seemingly overwhelmed by their fervor.

...Her reaction stung Lizer’s heart. He’d hoped this would bring her joy, but it was clearly backfiring. Maria wasn’t even attempting to smile, breaking

into a sweat and waving at the crowd.

...He had originally planned for her to make a speech here, but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

"The Champion must be arriving soon! When the time comes, we will finally witness true harmony and enjoy eternal peace and prosperity!"

Lizer ended his usual conference with the citizens of his utopia. Afterward, the pair returned to the palace.

A short while later, Lizer headed for Maria's room. He knocked on the door and entered after she bid him entry. She had wiped off her makeup and changed into a plain linen outfit. As Maria sat on the bed and stared at him, her expression grew somehow rigid.

Lizer frowned. "Have I offended you in some way?"

"...No, not at all. You've brought my dreams to life, Lizer. I'm grateful. I mean it."

And yet, Maria didn't look pleased in the slightest.

What's wrong? Why isn't she smiling?

Lizer couldn't comprehend what was happening, and he returned to his office unsatisfied. This uncertainty wasn't conducive to dealing in government affairs. Maria filled his thoughts, and he was incapable of doing anything more than sigh and wallow in his misery.

"Has Maria grown tired of me...?" he muttered before quickly rejecting the notion.

Impossible! She loved him, and he loved her. These feelings were forever. To doubt them was rude. Lizer shook his head to quell these emotions when

"It's the same old problem. You haven't gotten anything back," called out a voice.

A voice melodic and soothing...and that housed an uncomfortable static, which was utterly contradictory to the other adjectives. Rage and worry collided in his mind.

Lizer glanced up from the bundle of documents on his desk.

The devil stood before him. The smile on Mephisto Yuu Phegor's face as he stared at Lizer was radiant, sickeningly so.

"...I thought I ordered you to finish off my enemies. Are you done?"

Ignoring him, Mephisto continued. "You've realized it, too, haven't you? That girl is just a fake."

That struck Lizer where it hurt most, gouging a hole in his heart.

“She died that day—astral spirit and all. You’ll never resurrect her, even if you try. You get it, don’t you? She’ll never be the same.”

“.....”

“She might share the same memories, the same heart, the same form as the person who loved you, but she’ll always be an imitation—and nothing more. A fancy copy that depends on your recollections. She’ll never be the real Maria.”

“.....”

“That’s why it doesn’t surprise me that there are a few inconsistencies. After all, she’s not the real thing.”

“.....”

“Hey, Lizer. Do you get what I’m trying to say here?”

“.....”

“Hee-hee. The silent treatment, huh? Well then, I’m just going to keep at it. If you think the Strange Cube—a piece of junk—will return everything you lost, you’re sorely mistaken. It’s all a lie. An illusion. A mirage. A fabrication. Flimsier than papier-mâché. Meaningless idiocy.”

“.....”

“The truth hurts, huh? Doesn’t it feel like your heart will break? Of course it does. After all, she’s not reacting in a way that you expected. You’re nervous, aren’t you? Feeling a little scared? Everything you feared turned out to be true, after all.”

“.....Shut up.”

“You might not want to accept it, Lizer, but that’s reality. You’ve just been running away, showing the world your vulnerabilities. *That* isn’t the girl you loved. She’s a look-alike. That’s why things aren’t lining up and never will.”

“.....I said shut up.”

“No, I won’t. I’m coming up on the best part... Hey, Lizer—so wise and so foolish. You understand it now, don’t you? You’ll never get back what you lost. Little Maria is gone. She’s nowhere to be found in this world. This girl with you is a fake. A sham. That’s why she’ll never love—”

“*Shut up!!*”

Before Mephisto could pierce through his psyche...Lizer held his left palm in front of the Evil God—

“Aaargh...?!”

Black chains suddenly formed around Mephisto’s petite body, coiling around him and constricting tight.

“A-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Mephisto did a somersault, collapsed to the floor, and flopped around in agony like a fish.

“P-p-p...p-please forgive me... Please, I beg of... *Agh!*”

He could only beg for forgiveness as his body convulsed in pain.

Lizer looked down upon his pathetic form. “Have you forgotten? I have the power here and always will. Your life is in *my* hands. I’ll engrave that into your body and soul.”

The torment intensified. This was the power of the Strange Cube.

Lizer had done more than release Mephisto using the Strange Cube. The old man now controlled the demon’s fate, forcing him to obey like a pawn.

Even an Evil God was powerless against the wish device.

“G-gah! Agh-gh-gh-gh! I-it hurts; it hurts... *It-hurts-it-hurts-it-hurts-it-huuuuuuuuurts!*”

It was hard to believe this was the monster who had brought suffering upon all of creation.

Lizer saw that his pawn was still firmly under control and let out a sigh of relief. He gave an order to the demon rolling across the ground.

“Hurry up and kill the Demon Lord and his followers. Stay out of my sight until you have their heads, or I’ll make you regret ever coming to this world. Forever.”

“O-o-okay! I—I understand! Please, no mo...
Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

There was still some uncertainty that weighed heavy on Lizer’s heart as he watched Mephisto writhe in pain, but he remained optimistic and told himself this discomfort would eventually disappear. After all, he could make the most deplorable monster in the world do his bidding. Nothing was beyond reach. Once those who stood in his way were eliminated, he’d only have to press forward and fulfill his dream. There was no question that his path would be flooded with light.

Lizer was convinced of this as he listened to the devil scream.



“Something’s off. I don’t feel right,” Maria mumbled to herself in the spacious room given to her. She lay on the fluffy bed with a sad expression.

“What’s wrong with me...?”

She didn’t have a grip on herself. There was nothing restricting about her current way of life. She had everything at her fingertips. She could have anything she asked. This room was proof of that.

A bed fit for royalty. Huggable plush toys. And—the doll friend that Lizer had given her.

It jumped up from the floor and landed on the bed.

“Hey there, Maria. What’s wrong? You look down. You’re sad, huh? Huh?” Its tone was calm and soothing. The doll was as sweet as an angel. She wore a pure-white dress. A pair of wings, one white and one black, fluttered behind her. Maria called the doll “Mary” and treated her like a real little sister.

“It’s nothing. Sorry for worrying you.”

“Not at all. So why are you so glum? Go on, you can tell me.”

“Hmmm... I don’t really know why, either.”

She was in a utopia, but it didn’t make her happy for whatever reason. A strange sensation washed over any joy she might feel. As Maria told this to Mary, the doll crossed her arms and nodded.

“Maybe you feel bad that you’re better off than your friends? Is that it?”

“...Hmm. I don’t think so. After all, everyone except me is thrilled.”

The world was kind to her—and all the orphans. Each was given a palatial home in the castle town and was waited upon by a team of servants. They lived in luxury, and everyone always smiled as they relished their newfound fortune. This should have brought Maria joy. However...

“Why can’t I smile? Everyone is happy and having so much fun...and Lizer is here with me, too. I couldn’t ask for anything else.”

“That Lizer. Oh, Lizer. How sad he looks. How sad.”

Maria bit her lip as Mary spoke. She recalled the ceremony several hours earlier. Lizer was so heartbroken. The despair had been plain in his eyes.

“I’m sure he felt that way because I didn’t smile. I upset Lizer because I couldn’t show him that I was happy...”

She really did plan on smiling. It was a joyous occasion, so it was only natural. She became a Saint like she’d always dreamed, so why wouldn’t she break into a grin?

...But despite this train of thought, Maria had failed to understand Lizer's intentions and had hurt his feelings. She berated herself for this...but at the same time, she could only fixate on the puzzling sensation inside her chest.

"Something is off. I can feel it. I just don't know what it is... I can't even begin to guess."

Maria had no way of explaining the weird feeling inside her.

"I want to smile with everyone. If I'm the only one who's unhappy..."

Tears began to pool in her eyes. Just as the discomfort was about to send her into a crying fit—

"It's okay. Don't worry. I'll tell you. Mary will tell you everything you want to know, Maria."

"...Huh?"

The doll Mary puffed out her chest as she spoke.

"R-really? You can do that?"

"Yup. Uh-huh. I sure can. I'll tell you. I will. I'll tell you everything. All of it, every last detail, the whoooooole story," the doll said with a sweet smile.

What was going on? Mary's face was so charming, and yet...Maria felt it was uncanny.

"But hey. Listen up. There's only so much you'll want to know."

She was probably making a mistake, but there was no going back now. The doll wouldn't let her.

"There are some things you're better off not knowing. Did you know that? But—"

"Even if I changed my mind now, you wouldn't stop, would you?"

Maria was trapped—trapped from the very beginning. Since the moment she was revived and reunited with Lizer and everyone from the orphanage. She'd been captive the whole time.

The devil staring at Maria as he hung upside down from the ceiling had her in his clutches.

"Wh-who are you?"

"Keh-keh-keh-keh."

The doll laughed. The devil laughed.

"Hi there. I'm your friend, Mephisto!"

"Hi there. I'm your friend, Mary!"

The devil's voice came out of the doll's mouth—

The doll's voice came out of the devil's mouth—

“N-no...! Stop...! Stay back...! No...! *No—!*”

Peals of laughter drowned out the young girl's scream.

CHAPTER 86

The Ex–Demon Lord and the Reunion in the Labyrinth

The Armor of the Demon Lord. The common name of the 666 pieces of powerful magic equipment that I had forged back when I was Varvatos.

According to modern legend, I had created them prior to my reincarnation, worried about the fate of the world, and left them behind with future generations in mind.

They were half right.

It was true that I had prepared the Armor in the event of a worst-case scenario—if the Evil Gods were revived while I was gone. And I really did scatter the pieces to every corner of the globe. This, however, was just my way of finishing the job I’d started.

To set the record straight, I made the Armor of the Demon Lord to kill a single Evil God—to eternally eliminate this world of my bitter enemy, Mephisto Yuu Phegor, after Lydia’s death.

...But I’d failed to kill Mephisto—instead, sealing him forever...which meant the Armor of the Demon Lord had accomplished its intended purpose.

“I see! If we can get our hands on that, it might give us a fighting chance!” Verda exclaimed.

We were in Verda’s research lab in a corner of the old capital of Kingsglaive. Her voice bounced across the walls.

“...I think I remember there being a labyrinth not too far from here that should have three pieces of Armor. If we can use those...,” she mused.

It might get us out of this situation, but—

“Hmm. That sounds way too easy.” Sylphy didn’t look convinced.

Olivia nodded. “Yeah. Too simple... I bet Mephisto has something to do with this. Like he’s trying to lure us there.”

Everyone must have had the same thought on their mind: We were dancing in the palm of Mephisto’s hand and moving according to his will. For now.

I made eye contact with Olivia, then Sylphy and Verda. “Even if we’re following his script, we won’t give him his desired ending. Right?”

All three nodded vigorously. I knew I could count on them... I looked over at Ginny, who lay motionless on the ground.

“We’ll save Ginny and defeat Mephisto Yuu Phegor. And to accomplish that...we’ll dance to his tune.”

And then, once this was over, I’d slice off his hands and rip out his windpipe.

Verda nodded when she saw I’d made up my mind. “I have to stay here and watch over Ginny, so the three of you should go to the labyrinth without me... Will you be okay?” she asked us with a serious look, which was rare for her. We silently assented.

It would be Olivia, Sylphy, and me. No one said a word. Only silent determination burned within our hearts—



Leaving Verda and Ginny behind at the lab, we departed Kingsglave.

The labyrinth in question was nestled within the mountains, and even at a brisk pace, it would take us a full day to get there.

Sylphy voiced her skepticism. “Wouldn’t things have been easier if we tried to locate the Armor of the Demon Lord from the get-go? Then we’d have our magic back, plus some killer firepower—hit two birds with one stone. Much better than Verda’s gizmos.”

She had a point. After losing our magic, we had teamed up to complete Verda’s bracelets. After all, recovering our magic and fixing the situation were the only two things on our minds.

This new objective, however, made more sense to Sylphy. Nonetheless...

“No. I discounted the idea of collecting the Armor of the Demon Lord once I thought about it. It’s a foolish thing to attempt, to be frank.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Sylphy asked, confused.

I let out a heavy sigh before answering. “The reason is simple. We can’t use the Armor of the Demon Lord.”

“What?!” Sylphy blustered.

Olivia, on the other hand, hardly reacted at all. She must have concluded the same thing as I did earlier.

“Wh-what do you mean that we can’t use it?!”

“...I discovered something when I used the Armor of the Demon Lord in my battle against Elzard...” I paused. “It’s optimized for use by ancient peoples. Modern man—myself included—is not equipped to handle it.”

I didn’t intend to make them this way. In fact, I’d made it so that anyone could use the Armor as long as they fulfilled a specific condition...but magic had regressed more than I had expected, as the concentration of atmospheric mana decreased over the years. Ancient and modern people weren’t even on the same playing field anymore. As a result, no one in the present day could use the Armor of the Demon Lord.

“So, for modern humans to use it, we would need to rewrite and recalibrate its technical attributes... But now that we’ve lost our magic, that, too, is impossible.”

“W-well, I’m from the past, so... Oh, wait. I’ve lost my magic, too, huh...”

This was exactly why I dismissed the possibility of hunting for the Armor.

“That means there’s no point in finding it! Even an omnipotent weapon is a piece of junk if we can’t use it! Why are we risking our lives for this endeavor? I don’t get it!”

Well, I could see why she might arrive at this conclusion. Why stick your neck out for something useless? Even Olivia didn’t seem to have an answer to this question. Like Sylphy, she looked at me, eyes doubtful.

“...I do have an idea that may allow us to activate them. Just a theory—so I’m not sure if we’ll be successful. But...the probability isn’t zero.”

A nonzero chance was our only glimmer of hope.

...I could only pray the thing Mephisto had up his sleeve wasn’t something that would dash this dream.

“At any rate, all we can do is depend on the indeterminate factors of the Armor of the Demon Lord.”

“Right... Well, even if we *are* able to use the Armor, it’s hard to say whether it will give us any sort of advantage... I hate to say it, but I have my doubts.”

“Th-there’s no way! I mean, we have Ard on our side...a-and I’m here, too! Getting our hands on that Armor basically guarantees our victory!”

Sylphy puffed out her chest, beaming at us...but I could tell it was a bluff. Nevertheless, I’d pick her bravado over pure pessimism.

“...You were in Lydia’s Champion Army for about six years, right?” Olivia asked.

“Yeah. What about it?” Sylphy replied.

“...Then you don’t know his true terror. It all happened after you disappeared, but...”

I imagined Olivia was mentally replaying the same footage as I was—the hell that devil put us through. Everyone had despised him, vowed their revenge, and felt pure terror and despair as he twisted their plans right out of their hands.

I was no exception.

“According to the great Demon Lord’s autobiography...the battle to defeat this Evil God was fought on a scale never before seen.”

“...Yeah. Like the record says, it was war—all or nothing. Heavenly Kings obviously fought as soldiers, but even the civil officials—those who normally stayed off the battlefield—supported us in the rear guard. We gave everything we could.”

“To break down our forces, we had...a hundred thousand fighters from Sir Alvarto’s Mad Blood-Oath Unit, a hundred fifty thousand from Sir Lizer’s Blue-Eyed Martyrs, seventy thousand from Lady Verda’s Special Magic Research Squadron, and ninety thousand from Lady Olivia’s Demon Slayers—foot soldiers. Adding in the surviving members of Lydia’s Champion Army, civil officials, etcetera...the grand total is approximately five hundred and forty thousand. This extraordinary military assembly was mobilized to defeat Mephisto Yuu Phegor alone.”

Memories flooded me. My skin was sticky with sweat.

That wasn’t a battle—but a massacre!

“...We were unified—a group of misfits working as a whole. It was the first and last time that we banded together... But still...,” Olivia trailed off.

We couldn’t win. We couldn’t destroy him. Even at the very end, Mephisto Yuu Phegor never lost his smile.

The devil with an angel’s grin. He broke straight through the greatest army that the world had ever seen and drove it into the ground.

“...The Demon Lord had sacrificed everything. This included the subordinates who had admired him and his comrades who trusted him, even an enemy who he had pretended to fight in a battle to the death... He used his own life as a pawn. He did all he could... But in the end, his reward was

different from what he'd hoped," I explained.

During that devastating battle, I'd realized something: *We can't kill this monster.*

That was why I'd chosen to take the escape route—seal him away—instead of attempting to get rid of him altogether... But was that really a victory?

No. It was closer to failure. Things hadn't gone exactly my way.

If that was true, Mephisto Yuu Phegor was basically invincible.

I continued. "We might be able to achieve a superficial victory against him, but we'll never actually win. In any situation, Mephisto Yuu Phegor will always be the one coming up on top in the end."

They couldn't make him taste the bitterness of regret. They couldn't make him experience the terror of destruction. That was why we would never beat this nightmare.

However—

"We must win, even if it's only superficial."

"...Right. But what are our actual chances?" Olivia asked.

I nodded. "I'm wondering if there's some hope of victory in this situation. This is all a game to Mephisto Yuu Phegor. And he's self-imposed a power ceiling on himself to get the most out of it."

"Wait, hold on. Are we taking his word on that? If he drives us into a corner—"

"He won't. The man never breaks his own rules, no matter the circumstance. He'll refuse to go back on his word, even if it means death...as long as we're playing by the same rules."

Mephisto was different from us—he had no interest in winning by getting one step ahead of his opponents. In fact, he didn't care to win or lose; he was only after an outcome that was personally amusing to him...even if it meant his own destruction.

He was a madman—to the point of catastrophe.

"...At any rate, gathering the Armor of the Demon Lord should be our main priority. It's very obviously not going to be easy," I mused.

The Armor in question was in a hidden room within the labyrinth. We would have to find a special, well-concealed passageway to get there. Basically, once we found this secret route, we'd be in the clear. After all, there was nothing particularly dangerous about the corridor itself.

...However—once we reached the labyrinth and took a step inside the hidden passage...

“Ah, as I suspected,” I murmured, staring into the dim space.

The air in the corridor was bizarre. The area was supposed to be threat-free, just a straight line to lead you to the Armor...but that was all in the past now.

This had Mephisto’s fingerprints all over it. There was no question that the labyrinth had been tampered with—booby-trapped.

“Stay on your guard. This place is a minefield. Consider this no different than charging into the heat of battle.”

Olivia and Sylphy nodded, which was unsurprising since these two had plenty of experience under their belts. They sensed a distinct miasma in the labyrinth. At this rate, we’d be fine...

...or so I thought.

“Aaargh?!” Sylphy let out a yelp as water suddenly poured down on her from the ceiling.

...How many traps was that just now? The seventh?

Mephisto’s tricks were ingeniously hidden, and finding them all was near impossible.

Despite multiple setbacks, however, we survived each one. Obviously. After all, they were only childish pranks.

“Ugh! What *is* this?! ...*ACHOO!*” Sylphy kicked the ground, soaked to the bone.

Olivia chimed in irritably. “...He’s so annoying.”

Her beast ears and tail twitched. She was currently covered head to toe in a cloudy white liquid... I didn’t want to get any closer. It *reeked*.



I imagined it was some kind of dairy product. Either way, they were drenched in it.

“That damn shrimp! I’m gonna beat the shit out of him next time I see him!” Sylphy shouted, her cheeks bright red.

Her attitude showed no signs of nervousness.

...It was further *proof of his cunning*. Sylphy was playing right into Mephisto’s hands.

“You mustn’t be misled, Sylphy,” I said, picking up a pebble by my feet and standing in front of her. “His childlike behavior may seem innocent, but beneath it lies pure evil—I’ll show you.” I flung the pebble—far and long.

Plink. As soon as it hit the earth...

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Part of the ground turned to sludge. A giant monster reared its head. The slimy, scaly creature gobbled the pebble and disappeared back into the floor...and spears whizzed in from all four directions. Flames spewed out of the stone walls seconds later.

As we watched the spears melt, I turned back to Sylphy.

“When dealing with Evil Gods, their wickedness and intellect are by far the most horrifying. Mephisto Yuu Phegor is adept at manipulating the human heart. Evil Gods can guide you straight into the palm of their hand, make you dance to their own tune...and do it with a smile. This is why we must watch out for their menace at all times. Otherwise...”

They understood without me spelling it out. If we failed to grasp how Mephisto operated here, he would take hold of our hearts, make us lose our cool and drop our guard...before leading us to cruel deaths. He’d watch and cackle like the devil he was.

“You should keep your guard up whenever this corridor looks as it should. That’s proof that you’re losing focus... Okay, let’s go.”

Sylphy nodded without a word. Worry was back on her face. She was an experienced veteran who had survived battles in the ancient past; one warning was all she needed. In fact, Sylphy never let her guard down again after that. We outwitted several of Mephisto’s dastardly traps, and soon...it became clear we were nearing our destination.

—The sudden echo of his voice was all the proof we needed.

“Hey, guys. How are you liking my homemade attraction?”

We stopped in our tracks and glared into the empty space. He was

nowhere to be found. We couldn't even feel his presence. It was either just a disembodied voice or...

"You two."

"Uh-huh."

"Read you loud and clear."

Each of us prepared for battle—our senses on high alert.

The disquieting voice spoke again. *"Haste makes waste, as they say. Poorer quality. Unsatisfying your quota, you know the drill. So this is where the fun zone ends. From here on out—you'll be entertaining me."*

An instant later, an amorphous mass of darkness squirmed—and eventually took human form. Three people. Dark robes covered their faces and bodies. They drew their swords, and...

"Laughter! Passion! Tears! Theater! Show me the drama."

As if Mephisto's voice was their cue, the three assassins charged forward.

"Gh...!"

They were fast. Before we even had a chance to react, the enemies were standing in front of us with their bare swords glittering. I used Verda's handcrafted blade to deal with the one in front of me.

"Hah...!"

I alternated between dodging, striking, waiting for an opening. Metallic clangs rang out in the dim light, and sparks illuminated our faces.

...It was a woman. Her hood prevented me from making out all the details, but her face was clearly female. And a young one, at that.

Still, that didn't mean I could go easy on her.

"Pretty impressive...! You have my admiration!"

This assassin is strong.

I couldn't afford to pay attention to whatever else was going on around me. If I looked away from my opponent for even a second, she would lop off my head. My fight against this foe would be a vicious one, and—

Either by some strange coincidence or fate, I had been separated from my comrades and stepped out into an open space. I was wary of a possible ambush, but none was waiting for me. It was only the assassin and me.

"It's like we're in a dueling arena...! Wouldn't you agree...?!"

I kept talking during our fight in an attempt to throw the opponent off. A battle wasn't only about swords and magic; words were as sharp as knives.

"You're skilled with the sword. It's remarkable. Who taught you?"

It's hard to predict when you'll have an opportunity to strike. This time was no different. I hadn't said anything in particular...but my opponent flinched.

This was my chance.

I aimed a strike at her neck. A movement lightning-quick yet minimal. However—it figured I wouldn't take her down so easily. My enemy kicked at the ground and jumped back. The tip of my blade grazed along her skin...and made only the thinnest line at her neck.

I almost had her.

Still, I got a glimpse inside my enemy's heart. She'd land soon, so I—

“...What?”

My thoughts seized up as my words fumbled.

There in front of me. My foe had landed, and something—a gust of wind, perhaps—had knocked her hood off and exposed her face.

“I-it can't be...!”

Sweat broke out on my forehead, and my heart pounded.

...The assassin in front of me. I knew that face. There was no question.

I was certain of it.

“Help me, Ard...!”

My best friend, Ireena, was fearfully entreating me with tears in her eyes...

CHAPTER 87

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Meaning of Finality

“Aaaaaaaaargh?!”

Ireena’s shriek echoed through the open space. Her body lurched forward like an invisible string had yanked her.

She’d closed in on me.

“W-watch out, Ard!” Ireena shouted as her sword came crashing down.

The string of attacks was a blur; her Blade Dance was too fast for the naked eye. I managed to deal with half of them, while the others drew blood.

“Agh!” Ireena’s face crumpled when she saw she had injured her friend. Staring at the misty-eyed girl, I jumped back and put distance between us.

...So, what am I supposed to do now?

“S-sniff... Why is this happening? Please. I don’t want to do this anymore... Save me, Ard...”

Ireena looked at my bloodied body and wept.

Even though Ireena was before me in this state, I kept my cool. I couldn’t show any emotion. After all, this was one of Mephisto’s sick games. I had to get to the bottom of things or it’d be too late.

“...Reincarnating into the future only to be forced into a death match with the friend I wanted? Sounds just like him. However...”

Think. What is the truth?

Feel it out.

What kind of evil thing would he want to throw at me?

“...It’s horrible to try to step into the shoes of someone I detest.”

I am Mephisto. Mephisto is me. I’ll become him and read his mind.

“...Am I supposed to just end things here? There’s no knowing until I try.”

Depending on the outcome, I might be dead in a matter of seconds. But I’d made up my mind. Even if I died with regret or ended up lamenting a terrible mistake, I was ready. Unless I anticipated any future and kept calm, I

could never hope to fight that monster.

And so...

“A-Ard?!” Ireena cried with shock as she watched me.

I tossed my weapon in front of her.

“Wh-what are you doing...?!”

Ireena had no idea where I was going with this. I spread both arms wide in complete submission.

“N-no...! You can’t, Ard!”

She must have thought this was my idea of self-sacrifice. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

...Well, she was probably right. In this scenario, there were three possible outcomes.

First, Ireena killed me, and my journey came to a tragic end.

Second, I killed Ireena and consequently lost my own heart.

And finally—

“N-no! *Nooooooooooooo!*”

Ireena lunged at me with a scream. She closed the distance between us quickly, swinging her blade down as soon as I was within range. Was I going to be cut down the middle? That would be an awful way to go.

“M-move out of the way! *Move, Ard!*”

She was panicking. I couldn’t detect any insincerity. All of Ireena’s displays of emotion were genuine. The expression on her face was markedly authentic. She truly feared losing her friend and regretted that she couldn’t stop it, but—

“Ah. I see what’s happening here.”

It was about to make contact. The sword was closing in on my head. This was a lethal attack. And so—my suspicions were confirmed.

“You always lean forward whenever you’re about to break your favorite toy.”

I was on the brink of death. The curtains were closing.

I veered sideways and dodged the blade coming down on me. Using my whole body, I grabbed the outstretched wrists with both hands, twisted the joints to the limits...and broke them.

With both her hands now useless, her sword clattered to the ground. Then

—
“You tripped at the finish line, Mephisto Yuu Phegor.”

I took up my enemy's blade and stabbed her through the chest without a second's hesitation.

"Agh...?!" She gave a small yelp and looked down at the sword sticking out of her. A stream of blood dripped from her mouth... Then the bastard looked up at me and started to cry.

"Wh-why would you...?"

I dislodged the blade from my enemy's chest with a sigh.

"I'm not playing your little games."

And then I sliced through Ireena's neck. Well, technically, it was Mephisto's head disguised as Ireena's face. It caught air before crashing down on the ground and rolling.

If this had actually been Ireena, the head would have stayed silent forever. However...

"That's weird. I thought it was a flawless performance."

The decapitated head spoke with the terrifyingly beautiful voice of Mephisto.

I looked down on him and clicked my tongue. "'Flawless'? Really? The real Ireena would have sacrificed herself to save me. She would have bit off her own tongue...or begged me to kill her. Those would be her options."

Mephisto should have known all that.

"...You slip up when you get excited. You were set on killing me, but your enthusiasm went into overdrive just as you were about to land the final blow. Your mask slipped, and you revealed your true feelings... In that instant, you thought, *Killing him here would be a waste*, didn't you?"

Mephisto smiled at my question, then purred with the intimacy of a longtime lover.

"That's my honey. You're the only one who can understand me."

"Yeah, that's why I can never get your face out of my head," I spat.

"Heh-heh. I'm so happy I'm always on your mind—"

I gutted the freshly severed head just to shut him the hell up.

"We're done here." I let go of the hilt and collected the sword I'd tossed earlier.

"...They're probably still dealing with his sick idea of 'fun.'"

Olivia and Sylphy. I imagined both were suffering through the worst of it. I was mostly worried about...Olivia.

She was an impenetrable fortress...but there was one certain weakness

that made her frail. And that beast would know just where to find it.

“...I better hurry.”

With a vague yet intense sense of uneasiness, I rushed forward—



They're tiny, was Olivia's first thought when her enemy came into view. It was someone petite and quite short, only about half her own height. It appeared to be a young boy, based on what she could see from the face peeking out of his hood.

—However...

From the raw power, the talent... She could see he was far beyond the ordinary. After jumping around and knocking swords—ten, then twenty times—Olivia ended up in an open space with her foe. Between each clash, her mind raced.

A small frame has its drawbacks. But...if he can wield a sword longer than him...there are only benefits to being petite. He's a small target, for one.

Olivia had no choice but to admit that his swordsmanship was first-rate. That alone was enough cause for alarm, yet...

He has more than just his sword. He's casting magic into it and producing his own battle tactics.

Olivia jumped back to put space between them.

His vicinity started to glimmer, manifesting as magic blades, sparkling with energy.

Even if I put distance between us, he'll continue hitting me with these attacks. I can deal with spells by using my slashing technique, but...

Olivia proceeded to sever them—slicing and slashing the conjured projectiles that came her way and eliminating them all. Her movements were elegant and infallible...but she was so focused on taking care of the blades that her attention drifted from her opponent just the tiniest bit.

Seizing his opportunity, the enemy rushed in and swung at her torso. His breath, power, and timing were impeccable. There was no way she could dodge such a strike, but—

He can fight, but he doesn't have the experience to take me down.

Heart calm, Olivia parried his movements with ease. Everything had been a fake-out; the foe was convinced that he had her cornered, but that couldn't

be further from the truth. She'd only led him to believe this was the reality.

I don't have time to waste here.

There's Sylphy and...

Her little brother—Ard. She had to hurry to him. And so...she went ahead with her plan. Olivia evaded an incoming blade and used her own sword to stop him from slicing her in half, then she swept his feet out from under him. As the boy toppled to the ground, his hood slipped off.

A therianthrope? I see ears poking out of his dark hair. I hate to kill one of my own, especially one so young... Unfortunately, justice demands it.

Aiming for a vital point, Olivia brought her sword down.

—And in that instant—

“Sis...ter...,” whispered the enemy with a lowered head.

Upon hearing the word, fragmentary recollections played in Olivia's mind.

The citizens in the plaza.

The demons spectating.

The devil, laughing.

My family—despondent.

The grief on my parents' faces.

The blade coming down.

And—

“N-no! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!”

“S-save me, Sisterrrrrrrr!”

These memories had faded with time. It had taken years, but she'd finally healed the wound in her heart. Why was she suddenly remembering this now?

—The devil answered her question with a ruthless smile.

“You sacrificed everything in the name of justice.

“But I guess you can't cut down your own brother, huh?”

Olivia paled instantly at Mephisto's voice.

“I-it can't be...”

Her sword froze in place, and she stared down at the young boy.

...The longer she looked, the more it became clear.

The enemy was right in front of her, yet she knew these delicate shoulders, this timid figure. She knew this slender frame—one that belonged to a boy who had always come bounding to his sister in tears whenever his back was against the wall.

He looked up at her, and she instinctively jumped back. Olivia began to sweat. She stood as far from him as she could, as if hoping to escape.

“No... It can’t be... This is...”

Her breathing was ragged, and her stomach hurt. She couldn’t stop sweating. Olivia was physically unharmed, but the same could not be said of her heart. Before her—

The enemy. The small boy. The young therianthrope...
...cried out to her as tears streamed down his face.

“Sister...!”

Olivia’s mind went blank.

That silky black hair. That adorable face. Those wet eyes.

She could never forget who this was. The weeping child, shoulders trembling in fear, was...

“Luis...!”

Luis vel Vine.

Family she had cherished more than her own life. Her dearly departed brother.

He was right in front of her.

“Yes, that’s it. That’s the look. Everything went just like I thought, but I’m still having a grand time. You really are so fun to tease, Livvy.”

The devil’s voice rang in Olivia’s mind, and her face went pale. It was the same tone he’d used on the day he stole everything from her.

—A long, long time ago.

During the time of the ancient world, the one where humans were controlled by demons and Evil Gods.

Olivia was born the eldest daughter of the vel Vines, who came from a line of “Pedigree Slaves.” Of the enslaved races, they possessed special

authority that enabled them to govern the people on behalf of a small fraction of demons. Among this group, the vel Vines were a renowned military family whose voices held sway with their demon overlords.

As a member of this esteemed family, Olivia displayed exceptional skill with the sword, and was expected to have a bright future... However, her younger brother Luis had no talent to speak of.

“Why was I born this way...?”

“I want to be as strong and cool as my big sister. But I know that’s impossible...”

Their relatives were disappointed by the eldest son’s pessimism and tendency to cry over nothing. Olivia alone saw the potential in Luis and always encouraged him.

“I did it! I got one! I returned a blow, Sister!”

During one mock battle, he managed to outmaneuver Olivia—mostly because she’d been holding back, but a hit was a hit. Her little brother’s progress thrilled her.

She was struck by a certain thought. *His smile is too adorable.*

It was rare coming from him and blindingly bright. Olivia doted on Luis because she wanted to see it more often. Sometimes her love was gentle and other times, harsh. Her mission was to help him become a strong head of the family and continue to support him from behind.

“Luis, I might be stronger than you now.

“But one day, I want you to become a man powerful enough to protect me.

“I know you can do it. As your big sister, I have confidence in you.”

Olivia continued to encourage her brother and offer gentle smiles for his eyes only. She imagined his promising future. However...

One day, everything was stripped away—by the demons who distanced themselves from her parents’ influence...and by the Evil God Mephisto.

“N-no! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!”

“Save me! Save me, Sister!”

Olivia’s brother, the person who she loved more than anyone, sobbed and pleaded with her. Yet she was just as helpless. Bound by magic as she was, Olivia was incapable of so much as closing her eyes. She and the rest of her family could only tremble and stare as her little brother’s head fell to the ground. Then, after it was all over...

“Ahhh, that was a good show. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The devil released her bonds.

Olivia quietly asked him a question. *“Why did you do it?”*

The devil tilted his head for a moment before answering with a grin.
“Hmmmmmm. To kill time, I guess?”

Murderous rage roared within Olivia. She lunged at the face of evil and grabbed his jugular, but it wasn’t enough to wipe the smirk off his face.

“Hee-hee. That’s a nice expression. I saw this coming a mile away, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m having a ball. You’re as fun to tease as I’d hoped, Livvy.”

In the end, she never got her revenge.

The devil who had robbed everything from her just kept smiling.

There was no doubting that he wore the same grin now.

Just then, the voice of the devil rang out and pulled Olivia back from the past.

“I should warn you right now that there’s no way to save your little brother.

“You can either kill the family you love in the name of justice...

“Or you can be killed by your own little brother.

“Those are your two options.

“I gotta say, that’s one tough ultimatum. Well—entertain me.”

She could feel his menacing presence...

“Ah...! Sister...!”

Luis jumped to his feet and came charging at her. Olivia thought she could see a vision of the devil hovering above his head. The phantom smirked as it manipulated her precious brother like a puppet.

“Mephistooooooooooooooooo!” Olivia shouted in an explosion of rage as Luis swung his sword.

“P-please save me, Sister!” Luis wept, pleading with her.

This dulled Olivia’s reaction time. She could normally dodge such an attack without a problem, but the blade grazed her cheek.

“Ngh...!” She retreated and put distance between them.

Magic swords came rushing at Olivia. On most days, she could cut them

down with ease. However, her heart was shaken, and she couldn't defend against them with flawless precision. By the time she'd staved off the torrent, Olivia was beaten and bloody.

"S-Sister!"

He was coming for her. Her little brother readied his sharp sword to deal a death blow.

"N-no! Help me, Sister!"

The boy raised his weapon high with a cry...then brought it down. Olivia met the strike head-on and locked swords.

"S-Sister...! Wh-what is this...? What's going on...?!"

Past Olivia's blade, she saw Luis sobbing. As tears fell from his eyes and his nose dripped with snot, she felt her heart breaking. Olivia ached to hold him close, but that was a lost dream.

She had no time to wish for a peaceful moment with her brother.

Kill him or be killed. Neither was without tragedy. But even so...

I have to keep moving forward...!

For justice...! To save everyone...!

She would cut down her little brother. Olivia desperately searched inside herself for something that would give her the strength to do so.

This isn't my first time dealing with this sort of thing...! I've been in situations like this a million times before...! This boy isn't Luis...! He's just a copy...!

In the ancient past, a number of enemies had deduced Olivia's weakness and used her dead brother to drive her into a corner...

However, each of those attempts had ended in failure.

First off, his astral spirit was lost a long time ago.

There's no question that it crossed to the other side...and it has reincarnated—many times already. That's why this version of Luis is nothing more than a fake...!

Arriving at this conclusion brought Olivia peace.

"I don't need to go easy on a fake...!"

She focused her power to her legs and then her arms, knocking away the enemy. Olivia's display of bloodlust brought fear to Luis's face.

"Eek!" Luis cried.

Her heart would no longer be swayed.

"Hah!"

A mighty shout bolstered her intensity. Her opponent's upper body bent backward—and immediately veered sideways. Their locked swords crumbled, and he lost his balance.

“Kah!”

A strike that made the most out of this opportunity. A slash across the neck. And, at the very least, a single, painless moment. Olivia's heart was shallow.

She would cut off his head and end this battle. That was the only thought on her mind.

“He's no fake,” rang the devil's voice.

Time stretched into eternity. As her blade slowly made its way toward Luis's neck...the monster stirred doubt in her heart.

“I bet you're thinking that your little brother's spirit was lost a long time ago.

“And you're not wrong. But what if...I found a work-around?”

“Suppose I cut off a tiny piece of his astral spirit just before his execution and stowed it away until now. What if I knew we would find ourselves in this predicament now?”

“And the boy standing in front of you is your real brother.”

It sounded way too convincing to be a lie. And so Olivia's movements faltered once again. The blade meant to cut the head off the boy's shoulders broke only the thinnest layer of skin—

And instead, Luis drove his sword deep into Olivia's stomach.

“Gah...”

“S-Sister?”

They looked at each other with wide eyes. Two expressions of agony and surprise. They were grappling with their own emotions, but there was a common sentiment shared between them.

Grief.

Their hearts were drowned in grief.

“Wh-why...?! Why did this...?!”

The sword was pulled from Olivia's stomach against her brother's will, and he hefted it onto his shoulder.

“Lu...is...”

His big sister looked up at him as she fell to one knee and vomited blood.

...She had failed to kill him. In that moment, Mephisto's voice had given

birth to doubt.

She wondered if she would re-create that scene—the moment her brother's head fell—with her own two hands.

...And she couldn't do it again.

“...Luis.” Olivia dropped her sword to touch her little brother’s cheek. A tear fell from her eye. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t save you.”

Then she came to a decision. Gone was her devotion to justice; Olivia chose to let her brother take her life.

“N-no...! No, no, no, no...! P-please move, Sister!”

Luis's teeth rattled; strength coursed through his hands.

This was the end. Death would come in a matter of seconds. But it was fine. After all, nothing was more precious than her little brother's life—not even carrying out justice.

“Mephisto, please. Guarantee my brother will be safe after I die.”

With those final words, she prepared to meet her end.

Sisterrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr! Luis swung his blade with a shriek.

Realizing death was imminent, she prepared to accept it quietly, when...a certain face popped into her mind.

Her other brother.

Two identities flashed before her eyes, and...

“Olivia!!”

...a voice called out to her.



When I witnessed the scene, I cast off the mask of Ard Meteor.

“Olivia!!”

My body acted on reflex when I saw my big sister's life in jeopardy.

...The outcome was pretty miraculous, honestly. Just as the boy was about to cut off Olivia's head, I jumped toward her and knocked her out of harm's way. If I'd been even a split second too late, her life would have been lost. His blade cut through thin air and failed to strike anything.

“...Lady Olivia. Please drink this—hurry! If we don’t heal your wounds now, things won’t look good for you.”

I pretended to keep it together, taking out one of Verda's handcrafted potions from the pouch at my side.

"...Sorry."

Olivia's expression was mixed as she accepted it, but at least she still had the will to live. She quickly cracked open the lid and downed the potion in one gulp.

The effects were instant—healing the shallow cuts across her body and the gaping wound in her stomach.

...With that done, I turned my gaze from Olivia to the boy and pieced together what had happened.

"Are you her younger brother?"

"...Yes."

He eyed me—the new intruder—and trembled from head to toe. His appearance and behavior matched what I'd heard from Olivia.

"I see. You love to play some sick games," I spat.

The devil responsible for this called out to me.

"Welcome to our tragic little stage, honey—I was hoping to give you a taste of misery. I've been waiting all this time."

This was all part of his plan. It was obvious from his tone.

In other words...he was convinced that even I couldn't escape misfortune.

Olivia seemed to pick up on this, but...

"...Do we stand a chance?" asked my big sister, eyes imploring.



My heart stung when I saw her like this. If I could, I would have loved to stand tall and tell her that she could leave this to me.

Regrettably, I could only offer her the exact opposite.

“I can’t change the way this ends.”

It didn’t matter what was done. Her little brother, Luis vel Vine, would die.

Even if he was freed from the devil’s curse by some miracle, Mephisto would take his life and revel in our despair as soon as we gave a sigh of relief.

“Please understand that resolving this matter will mean sealing your brother’s fate.”

That was the repulsive truth. I couldn’t stand admitting it. Nonetheless, I cleared my expression of disgust and looked dead into Olivia’s eyes. I had to convince her that this was for the best.

“Listen, Lady Olivia. Those who are gone can never return. All we can do is selfishly live in their stead.”

Olivia looked down and didn’t utter a word.

Mephisto prattled on. *“It seems someone’s confident calling the shots. Or maybe you can say this because it’s not your problem?”*

I heard him chuckle. My past self would have objected...but these experiences in the modern era had helped me grow as a person. And so I stuck out my chest and readied myself.

“Even if you created *her* right in front of me, I, Ard Meteor, would not flinch. I guarantee that I would take her life and...take yours.”

“Oh? Well said, honey. Your power might be on the decline, but it looks like your heart has gotten bigger... But isn’t that just what you want? I’m sure Livvy feels differently. Are you going to force your feelings on her?”

I answered without a second’s delay. “Yes. I will. If that is where justice leads me, then I have no doubts.”

As if he wasn’t quite expecting this, Mephisto gave no answer.

“...Lady Olivia. Please feel free to resent me.”

I will kill Luis with my own hands. If you can’t do it, I’ll carry that sin for you.

“...Is there really no other way?”

I nodded when she asked me that, her face marked with despair. It was an expression that told me there was a dangerously high chance she might try

and take her own life once all this was over. I made a new declaration to my big sister—words that would bring small yet certain salvation.

“Even if the ending will turn out just as this devil planned, I believe we can change how we take it. And so—nothing will end tragically.”

Olivia couldn’t yet understand what I meant. She still appeared conflicted. Mephisto—silent until now—didn’t seem to catch my drift, either.

“I wonder what you’ll show me?”

The voice sounded slightly bewildered, more than a little excited. Then, right after he said this...

“A-aaaaaaaaaargh?!” Luis let out a scream, magic swords floating around him.

“Lady Olivia. I ask that you do not interfere.”

No sooner had I given this warning than the blades closed in on me.

I dodged, dodged, and dodged again. Nothing found purchase. Luis charged and came within reach of me.

“H-help m—”

“I won’t.” I stopped the small boy’s sharp cut with my own weapon. “You need to bear it.”

After deflecting my opponent’s attack, I caught him off guard, balled my right hand into a fist—and struck his youthful cheek.

“Argh?!”

Clearly no one had expected this. Olivia and the airborne Luis regarded me with wide-eyed shock. I couldn’t see Mephisto, but his voice seemed to hint at the same thing.

“Hey now. Isn’t that going too far?” A tone both surprised and exhilarated. *“He’s just a kid. How could you—?”*

“Silence. You can just watch in envy.”

It was true that my actions appeared cruel at first glance. But that wasn’t the case. Far from it, in fact.

“Ard Meteor...! What are you...?!”

My big sister sought an explanation, which was fair enough. She must have assumed I’d end her little brother with a single blow of my sword. This was a reasonable assumption to make, that even if I couldn’t save him, I’d try and make it as painless as possible.

I had the exact opposite thing in mind.

It was clear that Olivia saw my last strike as meaningless violence. Except

she couldn't be more mistaken.

"Lady Olivia. Sir Luis. And you, too, Mephisto. Your assumptions are wildly inaccurate. I didn't strike a defenseless child just now."

Olivia was speechless, unable to see where I was going with this. Luis looked at me in confusion while holding his cheek. I surprised him with a question.

"Sir Luis. Are you afraid to die? Do you wish to escape death?"

"O-obviously...!"

"I bet. But...your response is only appropriate for normal children. You forfeited this privilege at birth, Sir Luis."

Luis trembled. Olivia too.

They'd heard this before—more times than they could count. These siblings, born into a renowned military family, had been trained to possess a soldier's mentality and discipline.

"Sir Luis. I've heard of your situation from your older sister. When speaking of you, she seemed buoyant with joy...and stricken by grief. For the long years that it took her heart to completely heal, Lady Olivia was like a ghost shackled by the past... And it is you, Sir Luis, who is to blame."

The boy looked like he was in pain, and I pressed on.

"Yes—you're a young child who is barely ten years old. But you're simultaneously a soldier. And all soldiers have a point in their life in which they must die. For their master. For their beliefs. For their loved ones. There are more reasons to count... But it doesn't matter. When that moment arrives, a soldier must fall honorably. That death must overwhelm those who witness it and burn a fire in their hearts to be passed on."

I paused for a moment and stared straight into Luis's eyes.

"I was told your sentence was the last one to be carried out. In that case... you remember your parents' deaths, don't you? Try and recall them... I'm certain they were honorable. Both of them must have accepted their fate without begging for their lives and gazed at their surviving daughter in an effort to convey their final wishes. Your mother and father fulfilled their duty and died with pride... And yet, Sir Luis, you ruined that moment."

From what I'd heard, his death had been a wretched sight that only evoked grief and pity. There could be no worse end for a soldier.

"Because you died disgracefully—wailing and begging for your life—those feelings that should have been passed on from your parents to Lady

Olivia were tragically lost.”

Luis listened in silence as I critiqued him. There were no longer tears in his eyes. His expression held...a deep sense of reflection.

“Despite your age, Sir Luis, you bear a heavy responsibility. You are a soldier and the eldest son of the vel Vine family. You were in the position to become the head, someone to protect the family...including your sister. But you made a mistake. You didn’t just go back on your parents’ wishes—you broke your sister’s heart and left this world.”

I was sure that the following statement would be the cruelest yet, but it had to be said. Those who leave this world could never come back. I couldn’t change Luis’s end or his fate. Even if these were in the hands of the devil...

“Sir Luis. You have a chance to make amends. You can choose a proper death.”

Luis jolted. Behind me, Olivia did as well...but I’d focus on her later. All my attention remained on Luis.

“Right now, you are being controlled. The devil is manipulating your body against your will... Fight the spell that binds you. I’m not suggesting you’ll win. However, there is value in resistance. If you can overcome his will...”

I looked deep into Luis’s eyes before uttering my final statement.

“Your existence will live on forever within your sister. Not as her pitiful brother but as a proud soldier. Your last moments will spark a fire in her heart...and you’ll bring honor to your parents on the other side.”

As soon as I finished, a magic blade appeared in front of Luis. Its tip was aimed right at me.

“...I...I...” His shoulders heaved up and down. His breath grew ragged and his teeth chattered. Even so, he finally closed his eyes...and slowly calmed down. Then...

“I am the eldest son of the vel Vine family. I’ll protect my sister...and become a fine soldier.”

He opened his eyes. They were now cloudless. In that moment, he had broken free of the devil’s grip. The sword pointed at me turned around—and flew toward Luis’s small body as if called there.

“Eugh.”

A small cry escaped his lips. Luis had pierced his own chest with the blade. A second later, the weapon vanished. The small boy collapsed as blood

poured from the corners of his mouth.

“Luis!!”

An anguished scream. Olivia raced over to her little brother. She cradled his slight frame in her arms and sobbed.

“Sister...”

Luis was surely suffering and terrified of his impending death. He must have wanted to call out for help...

“Please don’t cry. Unlike me, you’re strong, Sister.”

The boy offered the best smile he could and wiped Olivia’s tears. His lips trembled as he asked her a question.

“Sister. Do I...look like a soldier now? Am I making a face that...Mother and Father wouldn’t scold me for?”

“Yes...! You’re a proud soldier...! Father, Mother, and I...all think you’re incredible...!”

Her tears—a fountain of them—cascaded down to Luis’s cheeks. To him, it was the best blessing he could ask for. Luis’s face was pale as his lips broke into a happy smile.

“Sister...I won’t ask you to save me anymore... Instead, someday...I promise I’ll be reborn as a soldier...who can protect you...”

His shaky hand wiped away her tears once more. Then he crossed to the other side.

“...I see. So this is what you wanted to show me,” the devil called out, breaking the silence. *“In the end, honey, you showed off your crafty side.*

“You drove her little brother to suicide for your own sake.

“Killed a small child through logic instead of dirtying your own hands.

“My goodness. Someone has the makings of a devil.”

I was sure that, from somewhere unknown, Mephisto was wearing a malicious smile. But his deception wouldn’t work on me.

“Is that what you really think? Are those your true feelings?”

The devil immediately fell silent. I took advantage of this and continued talking. I wanted to prove that I had crushed his evil scheme.

“You called me evil...but you also admitted to a fact you’ve been avoiding—that the situation fell out of your hands.”

Mephisto said nothing.

“You were determined to make Sir Luis suffer through a tragic death. But...see for yourself. Look at his face in death. Can you say his final

moments were wrought with anguish? No. You can't. He defied your bonds and chose a proper end for himself. Therefore—”

Mephisto maintained his silence, and I made my declaration.

“Sir Luis’s death was not a tragedy. It was no different from a soldier’s death that might be found in a hero’s ballad. His final moments did not ring of your intentions, Mephisto Yuu Phegor. In fact, that figure became more than just a wailing child and defied your wicked desire...and that has sparked a flame in us.”

I pointed to the heavens and boldly carried on.

“Absolutely nothing has gone according to your plan.”

The embodiment of evil now faced the unexpected...

“Heh, heh-heh...heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

Joy. Shock. Hatred. Anguish. Regret. Emotions melded together as he broke into riotous laughter.

“Oh, I knew it. It’s you. It’s always been just you. No one else can show me such a good time, honey.”

As if answering his excitement, the space around us began to tremble. Then—something fell in front of me.

Two eyeballs.

“I take it back. I did say you were uncoordinated, but I was wrong. I’ve gouged out my blind eyes and offered them to you. I was a fool.”

He gave a satisfied sigh and left us with these final words.

“I’m looking forward to our reunion in Megatholium. Keep entertaining me until the final curtain closes.”

And with that, his presence vanished.

I turned back to Olivia. She was still holding tight to Luis’s body...but finally, she laid him on the floor.

“Let’s go. I’m sure he’s giving Sylphy a hard time,” she said, her eyes glimmering with an intense light.

“Yes, let’s be off,” I agreed with a nod, and we hit the ground running.

Sylphy. She had to be suffering right about now, too.

And yet...there was no uncertainty in my heart. In fact, I was hopeful. She’d find her way past this and mature even more. That devil was about to wake a sleeping lion.

Armed with this belief, I raced toward her—

CHAPTER 88

The Raging Champion, Slaying for Love

—It was narrow.

The wide stone space felt cramped now; the pressure was unbearable. But she wasn't going to cower.

She would charge ahead.

Forward. Forward. Forward.

This was the Sylphy Marheaven way.

Retreat was not in her vocabulary.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!”

Sylphy held Verda's magic sword aloft as she rushed in. Her posture prioritized offensive maneuvers, completely tossing any defense to the wayside. It was a fighting method equal parts polished and wild.

“Argh!”

As soon as she got close enough, Sylphy swung her blade down. Any average soldier would be cowed by her energy and sliced down the middle before they could dodge.

Except her current foe was anything but typical.

Her opponent used only one arm. A single hand gripping a sword was enough to halt Sylphy's attack. It was cool and collected.

An instant later, Sylphy ducked down...and felt the weapon graze her skin. The blade passed through where her head had just been.

The enemy moved at radical speeds—impossible to spot and even more impossible to dodge. Her successful maneuver proved that Sylphy's battle instincts were nothing short of extraordinary.

“Nraaagh!”

Rising from her crouched position, she focused her power into her bare blade and sliced sideways. Her opponent was still in a thrust position, making it difficult to block her attack with a sword. They quickly kicked off the ground to retreat backward, and Sylphy sliced through air.

...We're far but close, Sylphy thought of the distance between them.

Anyone else might think they were out of range, but Sylphy could close in on her enemy in a single step. In other words, she couldn't afford to lose focus for even a second.

It's a one-on-one fight, but I feel like I'm at war.

A tingling sense of nervousness. A fiery burst of enthusiasm. Any greenhorn soldier would vomit in this extremely uncomfortable situation, but it actually brought Sylphy comfort. Plus—

There was something strangely nostalgic about it.

It was her flawless instincts. Sylphy had been honing her intuition for as long as she could remember, and it revealed the enemy's *true form* to her. The very next moment, she found herself calling out a certain name.

“...Big Sis Lydie?”

She shook her head as soon as the words left her mouth.

Ridiculous. It couldn't be. There was no way. That person was dead. She had died thousands of years ago and left Sylphy all alone. They would never meet again.

She was sure of it, and yet...

“Ah, I guess the jig is up.”

A voice as lovely as a cool breeze. The enemy lifted their hood to expose their face.

And there she was. That face. There was no doubt in her mind anymore.

Silver hair that glowed through the dim space. A radiant, mature beauty. Graceful limbs.

Everything about her was...her.

The woman standing in front of her, the gorgeous elf...

“Sis...?!”

...It was Lydia Viigensgeight. The progenitor of all who held the title of Champion. Sylphy's teacher, mother, and big sister—right there in the flesh.

“No... That's impossible... You're...”

Eyes wide and jaw slack with shock, Sylphy drew closer. Lydia's

presence grew with every step. Her whole body seemed to radiate vitality, eyes sparkled with energy, and her standing figure was majestic. This was Lydia. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes. This was the leader of bygone days, the person who Sylphy loved and respected.

“Sis...! Lydie...!”

It was true. This was really her.

“Sylphy.”

The voice calling her name had a familiar gentleness. A motherly smile appeared on her lips.

Oh, it's Lydia.

The one who had taken Sylphy in when she had nowhere else to go. The soldier who she revered and adored. Her one and only family.

How much had she yearned for her? How badly had she wished to see her again? Emotions flooded her heart and brought tears to her eyes.

“Sis...!”

Sylphy realized she was racing forward like a child reunited with her long-lost mother. She kicked up dust, prepared to fly into Lydia's arms, when

“I knew it. You're hopeless.”

Sylphy instinctively jumped back, and a hairbreadth later there was the flash of a bare steel. The sword passed right in front of her. If she'd reacted even a second slower, Lydia would have ended her life.

“S-Sis...?!” Sylphy couldn't comprehend what had just happened and stared in disbelief at her big sister.

Lydia sighed and looked sorely disappointed. “I thought maybe you grew up while I was gone, but I was wrong. You're still part of the teeny-tiny titty committee, huh? Just a brat,” Lydia said with another heavy sigh as she brushed her bangs aside with her right hand.

Sylphy was shocked to see her icy gaze.

“Wh-why...?” she asked, gaze darting around, seeking an answer.

Her disappointment apparently growing, Lydia scratched her head.

“Don't play dumb. Remember where you are. This is enemy territory, and you're up against that piece of shit—Mephisto. That should be enough to clue

you in.”

One can’t help but run away when faced with an uncomfortable truth. Even a person as headstrong as Sylphy was no exception.

It had slipped her mind that she was here—that she was in this situation. She should have known better.

This was exactly why Sylphy ran away, fleeing from the reality before her.

Lydia looked down on her weakness.

“I’m your enemy, duh.”

Lydia’s expression lost every trace of affection and morphed into the face of a stern soldier determined to eliminate the enemy.

“Ha, ha-ha. What are you talkin’ about? Is this another one of your mean jokes? That’s going too far, even for you—”

“Prepare to die,” replied the flat voice.

Suddenly, Lydia was there before her—and attacked.

A diagonal strike, aimed at Sylphy’s right shoulder. She managed to dodge it with only the slightest razor-thin margin to spare. Sylphy launched herself off the ground, jerking her body back.

For the first time, she’d retreated—going against her policy of rushing headfirst into any situation.

“Why...?!”

A tuft of her crimson hair fell onto the ground. If she’d been even a bit slower, Sylphy would have been halved. Lydia’s sword didn’t show any confusion or hesitation.

Now Sylphy understood.

Lydia was seriously trying to kill her.

“Why’re you doing this...?! A-are you angry...?! B-but...you don’t have to take things this far...!”

Lydia hefted her long sword against her shoulder and sighed for a third time.

“Give it a rest, Sylphy. The situation won’t change whether you like it or not.”

Lydia didn’t spare her the cruel truth. As if addressing someone who

wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, she explained slowly.

"You didn't think that douche would stage a tearjerker for you, now did you? He only restored me and allowed us to reunite...to make you suffer, Sylphy," Lydia said. Her voice grew monotone as she continued. It was like she was reading lines from a script. "I'm being manipulated right now. I have almost no free will. Even having this conversation is pushing it..."

"I-I'm sure you could—"

"No, there's no point. I know because *I've gone through this before*. Resisting is meaningless in this state. You'll never get your body back. Our only choice is to fight it out until one of us dies... Just like I did *back then*," Lydia stated, recalling her own end.

Sylphy had heard about her death from Olivia. She said Lydia had gone up against Mephisto by herself...and failed miserably. He took control of her mind and body, used her to commit all worldly atrocities...then had her dear friend—Varvatos—slay her by his own hand.

...Heinous in his ways, Mephisto was trying to re-create that scenario. It would be a tragedy between parent and child this time. Lydia would die in the same exact way.

"N-no...! I won't...! Sis...!" Sylphy cried out, eyes welling with tears. She could no longer bear to stand there as a soldier. She was a young, weak girl whose heart had been broken by an unforgiving fate. In that moment, it was the only way she knew how to respond.

"...Sigh. I knew it. You really can't do anything without me. That's why I thought of you in my final moments."

Warmth returned to Lydia's face, lips forming the soft smile of a mother gazing at her child.

"I have no complaints about my death. I thought it was a fitting end. But...I'd be lying if I said I didn't have any lingering regrets. After all, my degenerate daughter ran off somewhere and never came back."

Sylphy yelped as Lydia's eyes bored into her.

Now that her big sister was being gentle again, she had started to relax. Sylphy spoke to Lydia like they were back in the old days. "I—I...I'm sorry...I worried you."

"Yeah, that's it. Apologize more, you little dumbass. Do you know how worried I was?"

Lydia must have been dying to ruffle her daughter's hair. She raised her

right hand to her chest...only to put it back down in apparent resignation. She maintained her doting smile.

“I wanted to see how great you’d become, Sylphy. That was my one and only regret. And so—”

Lydia closed her eyes and took a breath. She opened them and turned to Sylphy. They were the eyes of a ruthless soldier.

“This time, I’m not just being controlled. Sylphy, I’ll kill you. By my own will.”

Lydia came at her, radiating murder. The Champion was gunning for her with no hesitation.

“Eek...!” Sylphy’s throat spasmed, and she retreated once again.

“Quit backing off! You’re the Raging Champion, aren’t ya?!”

Lydia and her blade were closing in. It took everything in Sylphy just to keep away. Her body trembled in fear, hardly responding to any of her commands.

“Argh...!”

Lydia’s strikes were deadly—fluid, unerring, and precise. She attacked Sylphy, willed only by herself. The truth backed her into a corner.

“Why...?! Sis...!”

Why was she doing this? Why was she accepting Mephisto’s bonds instead of fighting them? Why would she kill her own sister?

“This is a lie...! It has to be...!”

Although Sylphy desperately wished this was only a nightmare...Lydia’s energy, presence, and lust for blood were undeniable. Sylphy had stayed by Lydia’s side and watched her every move, so she understood, however unfortunate...that this was all real. And so Sylphy could do nothing else except run.

“What are you doing?! Are you really the type to retreat when the enemy is in front of you?!”

Fight me.

Lydia was egging her on, but Sylphy faltered, attempting to flee. Finally, Lydia seemed to have had enough of this.

She stopped pursuing Sylphy and bellowed at her with a face flushed in anger.

“You were better on the day I picked you off the streets! You might have been weak as all hell, but at least you had the decency to point a damn sword

at me!”

The words brought Sylphy back to the past.

Sylphy Marheaven. A war orphan who had neither a home nor family. Denied both parental love and the camaraderie of friends, she’d been tossed into the cruel world alone.

At first, I cried my eyes out. It was the only thing I could do. But I was hungry and told myself I couldn’t just spend my life in tears.

She’d been three years old at the time. She did whatever it took to survive—thievery, blackmail, arson, fraud, defamation... Initially, she was only following her survival instincts. However, as time went on, her reason for living became clear.

It was hatred. Everything Sylphy had learned from her years as a street urchin came from the darkest depths of society. No one showed her warmth. The world was always out to get her.

I hated everything I saw. I told myself I would break it. I vowed to destroy this world one day.

She never realized she was making a mistake. As someone who had only ever known darkness, she thought those grim desires were her savior.

Upon hitting rock bottom, Sylphy met a certain someone.

“What’s up?”

“Aren’t you that infamous little snot wreaking havoc here?”

She’s beautiful.

Such was Sylphy’s first impression. She’d never seen anyone so radiant—blindingly so. Which was why she wordlessly attacked Lydia.

—And failed to land the blow. Miserably so. She was soundly beaten and knocked out.

It was so frustrating! Sylphy hadn’t accomplished a single thing or satisfied her hatred of this world...yet she felt peace in the terrifying concept of death.

I didn’t die, though. I came to my senses and saw her broad shoulders... And once I realized she was carrying me, I attacked her again.

It was futile. No amount of strangulation, biting, and stabbing could get through to the woman.

On the contrary, she broke into a big smile.

“You really are the rowdiest in town. You’ve got energy for days.

“Hey, brat. I’ll give you a place to stay.

“You can go wild there.

“It’s a perfect place for misfits like us.”

That was how Sylphy and Lydia had met.

“You were a rabid dog back then! You’d have it out for me even in your free time!”

Even after Lydia took her in, Sylphy had hated her. She despised the woman who was brighter than the sun.

I challenged her every day—and lost each time, face bashed in. But...she always gave me a pat on the head and a smile...

No one else was like her.

A young girl attempting to kill the person raising her. A guardian beating the shit out of her adopted daughter. It was a strange relationship, to say the least. Calling it decent was challenging.

But it had healed Sylphy’s heart.

I never felt malice in her punches. I never felt disgust in the hand that touched my hair. I could sense the warmth in the eyes that looked at me.

And that was why I realized about her...

At age seven, Sylphy Marheaven had finally discovered parental love. Coincidentally, it was the first time she’d felt a sense of pride.

Sis made me human.

She turned me—a starving dog, beaten and bloodied, a weak mutt crushed by the cruelty of the world—into a soldier.

That was why... That was exactly why...

Sylphy’s only choice was to run away. How could she possibly fight Lydia? Would she truly be able to cut her down? Why did she have to turn her sword on her savior?

“Haah... Haaaah... Haaaah... Ugh... Waaaah...”

The tears came unbidden. Her fate was too sad, too horrific. Sylphy could no longer keep up her image as a soldier and instead became a weak, innocent young girl more suited to her age.

Lydia was outraged by this vulnerable display. “Dammit! Pick up your sword and come at me already! You’re supposed to be my comrade! Remember your title! You’re Sylphy Marheaven! A Champion!!” She gripped her sword and barreled down on Sylphy.

Her expression was contorted with rage, but there was nothing to be afraid of. Who would fear the face of a parent so concerned for their child? Lydia was giving final words of wisdom to her precious daughter.

“No one else would scrunch up their face like a baby and run away! They’d have the guts to charge at me! Steel Fist would throw a knockout punch! Steadfast would shut up and send that ax swinging! Great Sage’s wand would work its magic! Wild Bull would charge at me with a smile! So would Tempest! And Black Wolf! And Firestorm! And Dazzle! Even Fearless, that pushover! None of them would chicken out like you! They’d all look at you now and groan! They’d ask how such a coward could ever be the Raging Champion!!”

...What made her so confident?

They all loved Lydia—just as much as Sylphy, maybe a little more.

Thus they would act in the same way as Sylphy—and obviously scamper away, helpless in this situation...

“We’re grown fighters! The Champion isn’t titular! We’re not your ordinary fighters! Everyone under me has been a real soldier!

“It’s how we overcome! Even when reality is hard! No matter the trial! We never back down!

“Even if it means killing me! They wouldn’t hold back...and they’d kill me with a teary smile!

“They’d tell me to leave it to them! To rest easy! Those are my comrades! *Those* are real soldiers!

“And then—there’s you, Sylphy!! How long are you gonna stay worrying me?! Everyone else was a success story! But you! You’re the only one I still need to look after! When—when will you just give me a damn break?!” Lydia shouted. Grief poured from her soul and shook Sylphy’s heart.

—Ah, I see now. Sis is right. I messed up.

Everyone else loved her with all their hearts, which is why they could have killed her. They’d know it was the only way to return her love and set her mind at ease...!

Why did Lydia take them in? Why did she continue to lead by example?

To fulfill a dream? To make sure everything went her own way?

...No, that wasn't it. Not even close. Lydia never once said to follow her. In fact, whenever she did part ways with one of her own kids, she'd always give them a big smile.

"You're an excellent soldier now," she'd say. "You can go anywhere. Live proudly. And...be as happy as you can."

...Yes, Lydia always wished for her comrades' well-being. It was all she ever wanted. She was everyone's leader, teacher, friend, big sister...mother. There was only one answer to her love.

I'll prove I've become a true soldier. I'll prove I'm a worthy Champion.

I can only repay her...by putting her mind at ease...!

Sylphy gritted her teeth and clenched her sword. She sniffled back tears and looked ahead.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!"

Then she charged. Forward. Flying toward the enemy.

Toward her beloved big sister.

"Aaaaaaaargh!!" She attacked, swinging with all her might. It was determination in its purest form.

"Hah! Looks like you finally get it! You never were the brightest candle!"

A smile. Lydia was smiling. At long last, she was grinning with relief.

But it wasn't enough. Sylphy hadn't proven anything yet, after all.

"I'm the Raging Champion! It's my job to carry on the will of my big sister and our comrades! I'll show you!!"

She attacked—again and again and again and again and again and again. Never going on defense. Never thinking about what was ahead. Moving ever forward.

No retreating. Just looking in front of her.

That was the Raging Champion. It was Sylphy's ideal. And...it was the image of the hero she always admired.

"I'm all grown up, Champion Lydia!"

"Prove it, Raging Sylphy!"

She couldn't be a child forever. She couldn't fall into complacency and always expect others to take care of her. And so now—

It was time to leave the nest.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!"

Neither took a single step back. They went at each other full force, and—their blades clashed. The resulting force knocked both combatants backward.

“Haaaaah...”

Each took a breath, composed themselves, and readied their sword.

Sylphy and Lydia stood at the ready and stared down their foe like a mirror image. Silence fell. This next bout was likely to be their last. One would live, and the other would die. Whatever the outcome, they’d have no regrets.

“...I like the look in your eye, Sylphy. You ain’t pissed at that little shit for forcing us into this. That face says you’ve accepted your reality. You’re focusing on survival,” Lydia said, readying her sword with a grin. “I’ll share one last thing. Whatever happens, don’t let anger consume you. This is my own fault. And that’s why...I caused my friend so much pain.”

As if recalling the tragic past, Lydia sounded sad when she said, “Don’t be like me.”

Sylphy stared into her opponent’s eyes and nodded. “I won’t, Sis. After all...I’m going to surpass you.”

This seemed to be the best answer Sylphy could have given.

Lydia flashed her the biggest grin yet. “—Shall we?”

A biting air enveloped Lydia. Sylphy was ready to fight. They concentrated and honed their senses.

Their bodies and minds slackened. Then—

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!!”

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!”

Their energy erupted as they kicked off the ground with extraordinary might. The floor cracked as they raced for each other. Their swords were within striking distance in a millisecond. The killing blow was a heartbeat away. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly.

Both had made their move and drawn simultaneously. All of creation gently swayed. Meanwhile, Sylphy recalled a memory of the past.

“Agh, geez! I lost again!”

From bygone days.

It was one of the thousands of mock battles against Lydia. Sylphy pounded the ground as she crawled along the bare earth. Staring down at her, Lydia hefted a wooden sword on her shoulder and smirked.

“We’re similar fighters. We act on intuition. Our bodies react to our

senses before logic has a chance to get a word in— And, Sylphy, there's no question you've got more intuition than me. You just lack the experience."

"Experience?"

"Yeah. It only comes from time spent on the battlefield... Muscle memory, you know... You look confused. Well, you just haven't figured it out yet. But I know you will someday."

Her sigh was weary and her smile hopeful. She patted Sylphy on the head as the girl still flopped on the ground.

"When that time comes, I guess I won't be able to treat you like a brat anymore."

—Sylphy had been clueless at the time. Lydia's words hadn't made a lick of sense.

However, she'd worked hard to advance in one way or another—overcoming carnage, growing as a person. For the sake of Lydia and the others, she'd spent years locked away in a dungeon maze in search of greater strength.

And now...here in this modern era, she had met new friends who had showed her heights that she could have never imagined.

I see it now. The arc of Lydia's blade. Her target.

It's all crystal clear.

Here. I'll strike from the side and clash with her blade. Then, as soon as she stops moving, I'll feint.

She fell for it. Dodge, then...

————— I'll kill her.

Sure enough, a diagonal flash decided everything.

"Heh-heh... Ya got me..."

Lydia had been sliced from her right shoulder to her left hip. She gave a satisfied smile as bright blood splattered from her lips. Then...

"This is it," she said in a heartbreaking yet tender tone. Lydia softly brushed Sylphy's face.

Then...she pointed to the exit behind her.

"Well, get going."

"...Right." Sylphy nodded and turned her back on Lydia. Her fists

trembled, and her lips quivered against her will.

—She wanted to cry. She wanted to break down right there. Choking back a whimper, Sylphy smiled. She forced her trembling mouth to twist into a grin as she said her last words to her big sister behind her.

“Don’t worry, Sis. I can walk on my own now.”

She took a step forward and never looked back, even as she heard the thud of Lydia collapsing behind her.

She never broke stride.

“That’s enough for me... Grow up strong, Sylphy...more than me...more than anyone...”

Lydia’s presence and soul grew distant, but Sylphy didn’t turn around. After all, she was a grown soldier now. Not a child who made Lydia worry.

“.....”

She remained silent and continued to smile. Not a single tear fell. Then—

Sylphy Marheaven overcame the death of a beloved person and pressed onward.

CHAPTER 89

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Mysterious Young Girl

The battle was over by the time we arrived.

We were searching for Sylphy in the corridor when...

“...Hey.” Olivia tugged on my sleeve, and I came to a stop. Beyond her gesturing finger, I could see Sylphy in front of us.

“Oh, Sylphy. I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“Yeah. I’m happy to see you guys seem fine,” she replied with a small smile.

“Hmm?” I uttered when I saw her expression. It wasn’t hard to imagine that she’d suffered something far worse than Olivia and I had.

But she’d conquered it. In fact, she’d exited this horrific trial ready to reach new heights as a soldier.

“I’m very proud of you, Sylphy.”

“Ha-ha, where’d that come from?”

“...I think this is the first time I’ve ever had respect for you.”

“Geez, you too, Olivia? ...Hey, was that a backhanded compliment?”

I smiled as the two began to argue. I was sure Lydia’s soul inside me was grinning, too.

“Okay. Shall we press forward?”

The two nodded, clearly in good spirits.

We continued down the passageway, going deeper and deeper. In accordance with a prior PSA, there were no more traps blocking our way. The trip was almost uneventful; we arrived at a small room—our destination.

Three pieces of Armor sat upon three altars at the center.

First was the Mirror Shield of Omniscient Reversal that returns anything it reflects to its true form.

Next was the Divine Chains of the Shackle God that bound the target. The effect was more potent when the victim’s raw power was high.

Last was the Supreme Sword of Destruction, capable of cleaving anything

in two and eradicating its existence.

Of these three pieces, the Mirror Shield would serve the most use in our current predicament. If we could activate it, we could regain our lost magic. The question was—

“So how do we use it?” Sylphy asked.

A great question indeed. How *were* we supposed to use the Armor of the Demon Lord, which required tremendous amounts of magic, when we had none at all? The answer was—

“I have my own magical concept called Script Magic that I invented myself. I’ll try focusing it into the Armor...but if that doesn’t work, I suppose we’ll be forced to find another plan.”

“Script Magic, huh? Doesn’t that use mana from the air instead of a person’s own reserves?”

“Indeed. If we can use that to convert the magic in the atmosphere...”

“We might be able to activate the Armor?”

I nodded. There were plenty of hurdles up ahead. I’d crossed it off our list of options, since I didn’t feel confident in going for it without a practice round...but all we could do was hope for the best.

“Let’s not waste any more time.” I fluidly wrote an inscription in the air with my finger. “Just a bit more... This should do it...”

I added a few final touches and finished up my lettering. The Armor should have been activated by now, but...

“I fear this isn’t going to—”

Apparently, I had spoken too soon. The very next moment, the Mirror Shield sparkled—

“Oh, thank goodness. It worked.” I was relieved. I could feel the flow of magic again.

“Huh? Uhhh, I—I don’t feel any different.”

“Ah, my apologies. I could only provide enough power to reverse this for one person.”

After rewriting the Armor’s technical attributes and optimizing it, I was able to use it as my modern self and return everyone else’s magic.

I hurriedly set to work, and—

“Huh...? What...?”

Just as I was about to start, a stranger's voice called out to me. We immediately went on high alert and scanned the vicinity.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before the intruder made their appearance.

"Where am I...?"

An unfamiliar young girl was looking around in fear and confusion.

SIDE STORY

The Failure, Incapable of Resisting Evil

“Maria! Maria! Where are youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu?!”

Lizer’s cries bounced off the palace walls.

“*Huff... Huff...!* Maria...! Maria...!”

Foul memories flooded his mind. This was like the last time. Like the day he’d lost Maria. She was nowhere to be found.

She should have been in the palace! She should have been within his reach. He had made certain she couldn’t run off anywhere, yet...

“Huh? Your Highness? Why do you look so fright—?”

“Move it! Outta my way!” Lizer had shoved away an approaching civil officer—a small child.

After landing on his butt, he started to cry, terrified by the sudden outburst. Lizer ignored him, however. It was like the child didn’t even exist.

He abandoned the weeping boy, continuing his hunt for Maria.

A disgustingly melodious voice was behind him. “That wasn’t very nice, was it? Did he scare you? There, there.”

Lizer froze in his tracks before whipping around.

...The devil was kneeling with a smile on his face, patting the head of the fallen child.

“You don’t look hurt. You’re okay.”

Mephisto could have been mistaken for an angel...but the child must have sensed his true nature. He stood with a fearful expression and backed away as if in search of escape.

“Heh-heh. Seeing all these happy children warms my heart. Don’t you agree, Li—?”

Lizer’s fist collided with Mephisto’s cheek, and his small figure caught air. He slammed into a wall and slid to the ground.

“Ohhh, so scary.” Mephisto cackled as he rubbed his injured cheek. “What’s up with your cognitive dissonance? You claim you live for the kids,

but here you are—knocking them over. You assert that you’re a good general, but you’ve resorted to violence. Where’d this come from? Did something bad happen?” Mephisto asked with a tilt of the head and his sick perma-smile.

Lizer approached him in a mad fury and grabbed his collar. “*Where is Maria?!*”

Most people would cower at an outburst of this magnitude, but Mephisto took this in stride and continued to grin.

“Hey now. You’re acting as if I’m the one responsible for hiding her from you. How could I ever do such a thing? I would never kidnap someone so dear to you—”

Lizer cut him off mid-sentence with another power-packed punch. The impact sent Mephisto to the floor, but his smile didn’t go anywhere. In fact, it grew deeper.

It seemed to imply that he found the old man’s behavior very entertaining.

“You’re exactly who I predicted you were, Lizer. As long as the root of your anger and frustration remains the same, Maria is bound to leave you. After all, she has no real reason to like you. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if she hate—”

Once again, Lizer didn’t wait for Mephisto to finish his sentence before kicking his body.

“What do *you* know about Maria?! She would never betray me! Our love is immortal!”

“Oh yeah?” Mephisto’s grin shifted from derision to contempt—a smile that said he’d just seen straight through Lizer’s deceit and mocked him for it. “I wonder why you won’t reveal the true nature of this transformed world to her. Will you not show her the other side of your little utopia?”

A knot formed in Lizer’s throat. Mephisto’s sneer deepened.

“Lizer. Your heart has been warped through a web of lies and contradictions. You proclaim you cherish children, but you cast them aside with ease. You say you trust the one dearest to you, but at the same time, you don’t trust her at all. You’re blind to your own deception. You believe in a reality that doesn’t exist.”

The devil worked in his ways. He cut to the core of the human heart and played with it.

“You’re convinced that you and little Maria are getting to know each

other better and share a mutual connection, but no one else shares that version of reality. Your idea of love is centered all on you. It's always been one-sided—you only care about yourself. And the fact of the matter is that you don't understand her at all. You don't love Maria. You just love loving her—”

Lizer couldn't bear to hear any more. If Mephisto kept going, he had a feeling something precious inside him would break. And so he punished the Evil God.

“Argh?! Gah-gah-gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

By just raising his hand and willing his orders, Lizer could inflict terrible agony on Mephisto. The devil was his servant. And Mephisto could never disobey his master's command. That was how things were now. Lizer had total control.

“I have no intention of entertaining you. Bring Maria back here. If you fail me...”

Mephisto’s pain intensified. The devil thrashed around in front of Lizer like a beached fish. “Gah! G-gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Writhing in pain, Mephisto cried out. “I-I’m sorry! I’m sorry! P-please forgive me! Pleaaaaaase!” he begged through sobs, throwing up sporadically.

Lizer observed his shameful state with dark delight and began to smi—

"Ah-ha!"

Before Lizer could break out in a full grin, he heard crazed laughter behind him.

“Keh-keh, keh-keh-keh...! Ah, sorry. I just couldn’t stop myself! You’re so funny! —Hee-hee-hee-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh-keh—*ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*”

Mephisto Yuu Phegor, the devil, was standing behind Lizer, clutching his stomach in laughter.

So who was the one squirming on the floor?

“Heh-heh-heh-heh... Forgive me, Lizer. Your madness is incorrigible. I can’t believe *you’d actually destroy the thing you love most.*”

Lizer's heart felt like it was being crushed. Right before him, Mephisto—

the one collapsed on the floor—transformed into someone else entirely.

The figure of the young girl who meant the world to him.

“Ma...Mari...*Mariaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!*”

He screamed as he ran to her. Falling to his knees, he held her in his arms. Her breaths were faint.

“Hee...hee...hee-hee...”

Maybe the pain had broken her heart. Strained laughter squeaked from her throat.

“A-agh...! *Aghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!*” Lizer shrieked, tears pouring down his face.

Then, in front of him...

“——Ahhh, pranked *again*.”

Maria’s lips twisted in a crescent shape, breaking into a huge smirk. Just like a devil.

“Maria...?”

“*Bzzzt!* Guess again, Lizer. The answer is—me.”

Mephisto peeled off the girl’s face to reveal his true form...and the two devils began to laugh in unison, cackling.

“Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. You’re so stupid, Lizer.”

“I wouldn’t waste Maria’s life by psychologically breaking her for a scene of this magnitude.”

“Maria is an important cast member. The snapping part comes later.”

“Besides, heh-heh, I’d love to show her that stupid look on your face just now.”

“Let’s do it. I took a picture.”

“Oh, nice one. I’ve got a good head on my shoulders.”

“Heh-heh. I can hardly wait. It’s going to be so fun. When should we show her?”

“Maybe right before dealing the final psychic blow?”

“Oh yeah. We can show Maria just as she’s about to die from despair.”

“I wonder what sort of expression she’ll make?”

“Hmmmmmm. Whenever I imagine it—”

““——I can’t stop laughing.””

Hellish smiles twisted on the heavenly faces of the two Mephistos.

In that moment, Lizer abandoned everything.

I have to destroy him. He can't exist.

Doing so meant losing his greatest weapon, but Lizer didn't care anymore. He'd use his unhinged rage to eliminate Mephisto from this world.

To do so, he only had to hold his palm out toward his enemy and wish for him to disappear. This simple task would send this nightmare back into eternal darkness.

"Disappear! Mephisto Yuu Phegor!"

Now, this chapter would close—or it should have anyway.

In reality, however, only the Maria look-alike vanished. The other Mephisto remained. He stood there casually and continued to guffaw.

"That can't be..."

Disappear. Disappear. Disappear. Disappear.

Mephisto went nowhere, even though Lizer willed for something to happen.

The nightmare refused to end.

"You planned to keep me under your thumb with the Strange Cube, but I'm afraid you're mistaken. That piece of trash could never hold me back."

That was the truth. It was solid fact. Still, Lizer wouldn't give up. He held his palm out to inflict more pain, and—

"Oh, about that. I was pretending this whole time. Heh-heh. I'm pretty proud of my acting skills. I've got a shot at stardom, wouldn't you say?" Mephisto said as he straightened his back.

Lizer could only stare at him, and Alvarto's words raced through his mind. His warnings were true.

"The monster must not be resurrected—no matter the circumstance."

Lizer couldn't contain this evil. He was now made aware of his own foolishness. His actions had been for the sake of those dearest to him, but in the end, he would destroy everything by his own hand.

"Well then, I think it's about time that we started getting ready."

Mephisto approached him, almost floating, feet bouncing.

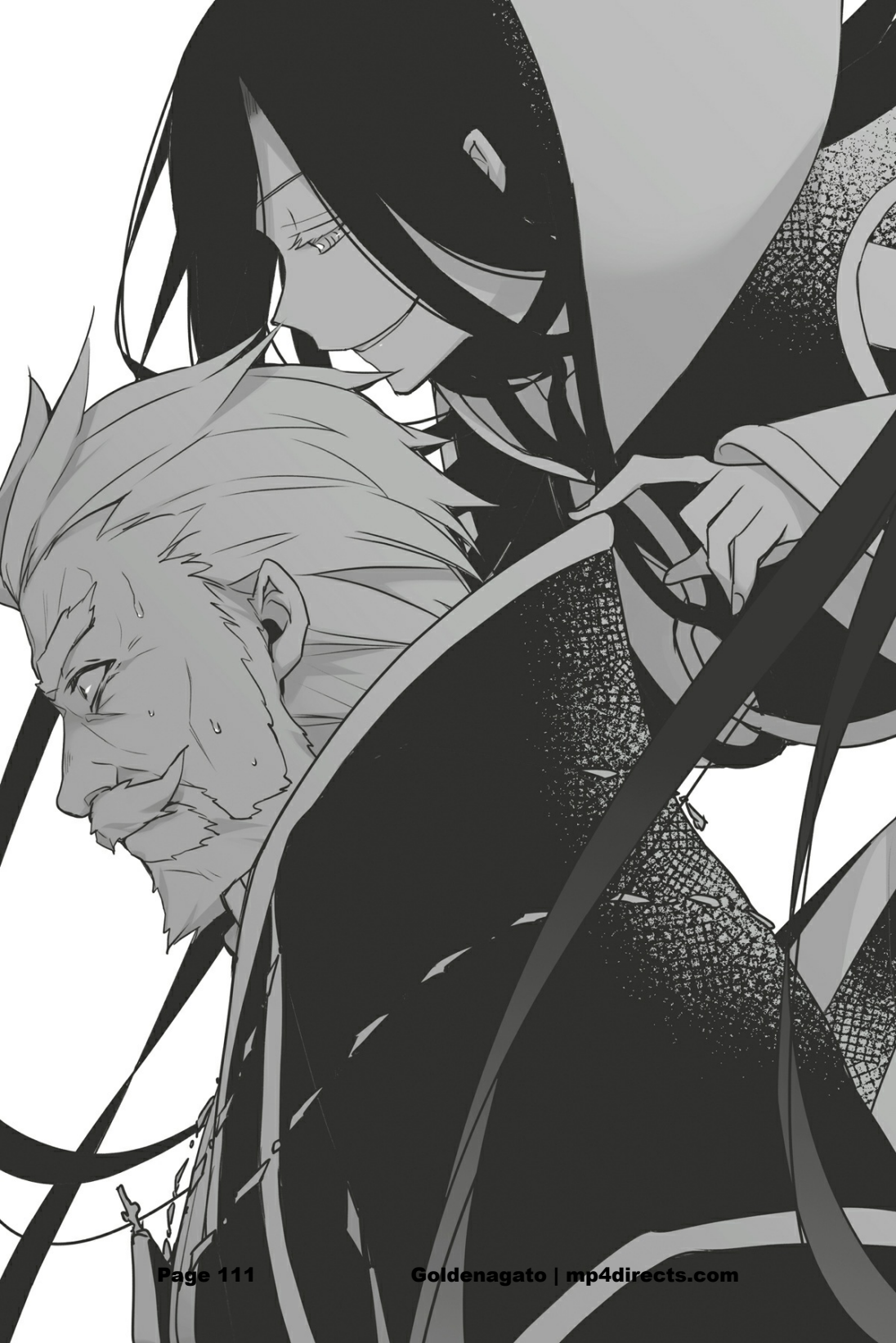
Lizer no longer had the energy to run away. He knew it'd be pointless.

"Oh, Lizer. The real show is just beginning," Mephisto stated with an even smile. It was like a black sun. The grin of evil. "As our main star, you'll have to work twice as hard. Try and hold yourself together until the very end,

'kay?'"

Like a small child reaching for a toy, Mephisto Yuu Phegor held his palms out to Lizer. He was proclaiming that the nightmare was about to start.

"We'll draw a nice, neat path to love—the final destination. And let's make sure everyone has a good laugh while we're at it."



CHAPTER 90

The Ex-Demon Lord in Enemy Territory

“Where...am I...?”

A mysterious girl appeared as soon as we acquired the Armor of the Demon Lord. Like her, we had no idea what was going on, either.

“Might she be an assassin sent in by Mephisto...?” Olivia asked.

“...I don’t sense any hostility, though.” I nodded, focusing on the young girl in front of us.

...She was normal. Average in every way. Her chestnut hair fell to her shoulders. Freckles. Sweet face. A regular child, one who could be found anywhere.

That was my impression of her, but...

“Her clothes seem to be woven from a high-quality silk. I’m curious as to why her features and outfit are so out of proportion.”

It felt like...a child of the lower classes had been overdressed. The real question was who was responsible.

“Might you tell us your name, young lady?”

My intention was to put her at ease with my tone and expression, but unsurprisingly, she remained cautious. She was, however, able to answer my inquiry.

“M-Maria.”

“A fine name. Well then, Maria. Why have you come to us?”

“I—I don’t know.”

Based on this answer and the worry crossing her young face, I surmised she was not here by her own will. In other words, someone else had sent her. And the culprit was undoubtedly Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

“So she *is* an assassin?” Olivia asked.

“...I find it hard to believe that she’d have any connection with him. But maybe that’s exactly why she might.”

Hmph. We’d just be wasting time at this rate. In that case, we were going

to have to act a little recklessly and shoulder the risk of getting involved.

“We can’t afford to have a staring contest forever with you. I shall reveal her true nature in a quick and precise manner.”

“...You plan on reading the memories in her spirit?”

“That’s risky. What are you gonna do if it’s a trap? Your heart could break if you’re not careful.”

“I cannot say that there’s no chance of that, but I don’t believe that trickster would do such a thing. It should be no problem.”

Mephisto was a moral failure, but there was regulation and consistency to his madness. He wouldn’t do anything unpredictable, which was why I didn’t think he’d attack us here.

That meant Maria played a significant role in this mess. Depending on what that entailed...she might become the key to preventing tragedy.

“Maria. Forgive me if I’m being rude, but I’d like you to tell me about yourself.”

I slowly stepped forward. I was doing my best to put her at ease, but she was as tense as ever. She did seem to read my intentions, though. She didn’t run away.

“Please excuse me.”

I stopped right in front of Maria and held my right hand over her head, casting spirit-reading magic. An instant later, all the information from her astral body flowed into my mind.

Death. Separation. Anxiety. Fear.

Orphanage. Friends. Family. Adult caretakers.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

Hope. Relief. Envy. Adoration. Happiness—love.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

Death. Agony. Fear. Separation.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

Reunion. Relief. Love.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

Confusion. Distress. Anxiety. Obscurity. Love.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

“.....I see what’s going on.”

I understood everything. Maria's true self. Mephisto's schemes. And—the truth about the man known as Lizer.

Now that I fully understood it all, I knew what our next steps should be.

“Maria. Please allow us to protect you. We will ensure that you're reunited with Sir Lizer.”

“Huh? R-really...?”

“Yes, I promise.”

Maria lowered her defenses, evidently relieved by this.

“I'm Ard Meteor, and my two companions are Olivia vel Vine and Sylphy Marheaven... I'll be sure to introduce you to our other friends later.”

I cast teleportation magic, and we returned to Verda and Ginny. After immediately operating on Ginny and confirming her full recovery, I restored magic in everyone. With the Mirror Shield of Omniscient Reversal, we'd regained our lost power.

“Our preparations are complete. Now all we must do is head to Megatholium... However...”

This was Mephisto's handiwork. He had cast a jamming technique over a wide range with Megatholium at the center. Because of that, we couldn't teleport and had to go on foot.

It would be a long, long trek.

Our teleportation magic wasn't the only thing that had been interrupted. We also couldn't use any spells that would make the journey more pleasant, so we had to secure food, bedding, and whatever else all on our own. We made the most of our survival skills while dealing with these added inconveniences. We somehow pressed forward while working with nature.

We were currently sitting around a campfire under the night sky in the middle of an open field. The flickering flames illuminated the darkness.

“Guys! The stew is ready!”

We smiled at the sound of Maria's cheerful voice.

“Took you long enough!”

“We were waiting.”

“...Indeed.”

Despite the limited access to ingredients, Maria's stew was top-notch. Her days at the orphanage must have taught her a few things. She was an expert at creating exquisite flavors from even the humblest of ingredients.

“Ahhhh, that hit the spot!”

“Strange. To think random ingredients could taste so delicious,” Ginny agreed.

“...You can have my meat. Don’t worry about it. Kids should eat.”

They always say the way into someone’s heart is through their stomach. The distance between us had closed.

Verda and I were observing them from far away, enjoying our own discussion.

“Wowzer, Maria sure did warm up to us fast.”

“Yes. I mean, those three adore children; plus, they’ve been taking particularly good care of her. It’s no surprise that she opened up to them so quickly.”

“Good point... I gotta wonder if it’s all going to go down just how my teacher planned things,” Verda said with a weary shrug.

I nodded. Mephisto must have inconvenienced us with this jamming so we could get to know Maria better. Cohabiting would allow us to form close bonds with her...and feel greater tragedy in the future.

“...He’s twisted.”

“Well, that’s my teacher for ya.” Verda didn’t look especially spiteful. In fact, she seemed to be reminiscing about the past.

I asked her a question. “Do you still feel for him, even after parting ways?”

“Yeah, you could say that. Love is a tricky thing,” Verda replied, shrugging. “I mean, he did raise me in a way. Like a parent. I know I should wish death on him, but...it’s complicated.”

“Do you think these feelings will remain—no matter how heinous and despairing his actions?”

Verda nodded, and I returned the gesture before looking at Maria.

“Once it hits you, it never goes away,” I said. “Love is a curse in that way. That’s also why—”

“—It even casts off the devil’s chains, right?”

“Yes. We’ll fail otherwise. Mephisto Yuu Phegor said the theme of this trial is love. If the concept of affection bended to his will, we would have no chance of victory. However—”

I looked at Maria smiling with everyone. “I have faith. I believe her love can exceed even a monster’s expectations.”

“Me too. I’m sure this disaster will have a happy ending.”

We nodded before sipping our stew.

The night wore on—and everyone fell asleep on the naked earth. Full stomachs and fatigue knocked them right out. I served as night watch in front of the campfire, but...

“...Is something the matter, Maria?” I asked when she rose.

She looked up at the night sky and whispered, “I’m nervous about seeing Lizer again.”

When I saw her so forlorn, I patted the empty spot next to me. She approached me daintily and sat down.

“I only have boiled water, but would you like some?”

“Yes, please.” Maria brought the wooden cup to her lips and quietly continued. “...You’re a lot alike.”

“To whom?”

“You remind me of Lizer, Ard.”

“...Yeah?”

“Just being around you warms my heart... It makes me happy. Until now, only Lizer has made me feel this way.”

“...And you think we’re similar? Sir Lizer and me?”

“Yes.”

I wasn’t going to refute it. After reading into her memories and understanding who Lizer really was, I had to agree. Maria was right. Lizer and I *were* similar.

And...it was safe to say that our core natures were identical. Both Lizer and I were egotistical men at heart. We kept making mistakes because we failed to realize this. I came to understand this part of myself after suffering bitter experiences in the past. From that point on, I always looked at my actions from objective points of view...

But Lizer didn’t yet realize his true nature. Even now, he was being led astray. To help him understand himself and put him on the right path...this girl was crucial.

I stared straight into her eyes. “Maria. Your worries come from lack of mutual understanding.”

“Mutual...understanding?”

“Yes. There’s a side to Sir Lizer that you don’t know yet. And...I don’t think he fully understands you, either. This creates discord and anxiety. But...the current matter can solve this.”

The girl looked at me blankly; I doubted she got what I was saying at all.

“...At any rate, we’ll go see him. This will put to rest the worry in both your hearts, along with everything else.”

“Yeah. I hope you’re right,” Maria replied with a nod of hope.

I was almost certain that Maria was imagining a bright and certain future—even if it was only a vague idea. I wanted to do whatever I could to somehow make it a reality. I aspired to crush the devil’s plans and save both this poor girl and my former subordinate. No, I *would* save them. I wouldn’t permit another tragedy. And so—

My friends and I arrived at Megatholium, stepping onto its soil. The enormous gates were propped wide open, as if ushering us in.

“No matter what situation awaits us...I advise you all to remain calm. That was how he got us last time. But we will not be fooled twice.”

We’d been defeated when he’d ambushed us at the laboratory. However, now that our hearts and bodies were sound, we had a chance of taking on Mephisto Yuu Phegor. So long as we made use of the Armor of the Demon Lord, victory was not out of reach.

“Well then...let’s go.”

We stepped forward, expressions tight. Maria, on the other hand, didn’t seem to understand the reason for our nerves. She walked alongside us in bewilderment, and I gently patted her head.

“I promise we will bring back everyone and their smiles. Please try to trust us.”

“...Okay.”

Maria gave a perplexed nod. She was a weak, young child. The devil had placed far too harsh a fate on her tender shoulders. Simply because he wanted to see a first-rate tragedy.

I would ensure he received what was coming for him.

You’ll be the loser this time, Mephisto Yuu Phegor.

Determination, burned in my breast. My friends and I stepped onto the tragic stage that he had prepared for us—

CHAPTER 91

The Ex-Demon Lord and Malice, Uncovered

Quickly after entering Megatholium, we noticed a strange atmosphere.

“The place appears to be deserted.”

Megatholium was a city-state, and its population reflected this.

It was early afternoon, which meant people were getting into the swing of things. The main avenue, however, was utterly empty.

“Something’s up. This place looks like a ghost town.”

“Did they go somewhere...?” Ginny remarked.

“...Or...”

“Maybe they’re hiding somewhere, preparing to fight.”

Just as Verda finished Olivia’s sentence, that became reality.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

A horde of armed enemies leaped out from the surrounding buildings. Their eyes glowed blue, and an insignia in the same hue was pulsing on their chests. They were puppets with no will of their own. Lizer had manipulated them with his *Original* so his range would be greater. It was well within the realm of reason to assume they planned to attack, but...

“Wh-what’s going on here...?”

“Why are they all children...?!”

That was right. The horde was comprised of children.

Lizer prioritized the rights and happiness of children above anything else in the world. So he would never force them to do this...or so I thought.

This twist had to be Mephisto’s doing.

As my friends stood there, flustered, I raised my voice.

“Even if our enemies are children, we must defeat them and press forward! Overcoming this adversity is our only path to the future we seek!”

Then they descended upon us—countless children; poor, defenseless kids-turned-dolls.

“Eek...!” Maria yelped.

As I held the frightened girl to protect her, I spoke gently. “Do not fear. No harm shall befall you.”

No sooner had I declared this than I cast the defense spell *Mega Wall*. A moment later, we were covered by a protective half-dome shield.

“Leave this to me,” I said.

These children being controlled by Lizer’s strange abilities were difficult to deal with. It wasn’t just their sheer power—it was the fact that they could strip you of your free will with a single touch. If that happened, we would start taking down our own allies or, in a worst-case scenario, kill one another off entirely.

However...

“I will not allow you to lay a single finger on me.”

I used wind magic against the incoming children. The gale whipped up a vortex, blasting many of them away.

“I knew Ard could do it! Even this is nothing for him—,” Ginny cooed.

“Blowing them away but also making sure no one gets hurt, huh? You’ve got skill.”

They might have been enemies, but they were victims, too. Right before the children were about to hit the ground, I cast a floating spell to stop them from getting hurt. This was both out of consideration for my opponents...and for Maria.

“Why is this happening...?”

Not that anything I did would alleviate her mounting concerns. Maria was clearly hoping for an explanation, but she’d never believe me in her current state. And...I didn’t have time to clarify the situation now.

“Hmph. Things are certainly not going to be easy for us.”

The attackers seemed to increase with each passing second. It was difficult not to lay a single scratch on the overwhelming surge of children. If we kept going like this, I’d eventually mess up somewhere and hurt the young victims unnecessarily.

As if foreseeing this, Olivia called out to me. “Shouldn’t we find a new route?”

I nodded once. “I’ll clear a new path from here. Please watch your step.”

Then I cast a spell beneath us. The cobblestone path abruptly broke apart and formed a giant pit. Just as we were about to drop down—

“Huh?!” Maria exclaimed as we all plummeted.

I immediately filled the hole to block the enemy's pursuit as a falling sensation enveloped me. After that, I cast floating magic on everyone to soften our landing. The descent was not particularly eventful...and we safely landed in the sewers.

I soon turned to Maria. "...What did you see?"

The girl's face was pale, expression disturbed. She was silent for a moment. "Everyone was there...but why...did they look so scary...?"

By "*everyone*," she must have meant her friends... Did Lizer force his other beloved children to attack?

"Why is this happening...? What's wrong with everyone...?"

I don't know what's going on. This is a nightmare, she seemed to say with her eyes.

"...Hey. Um, you guys know, don't you? The reason for all this?"

If she wanted an explanation, it was our duty to provide one. We hadn't had the time before, but we did now. Even if the truth was hard to swallow, she had the right to know.

"...Everything is Sir Lizer's doing."

"What?" Maria's eyes grew wide.

I elaborated. "I understand this may be hard to believe, but it is the truth. The disaster in the city had to have been willed by him. There is no room for doubt."

It wasn't because the devil was controlling him. This was all Lizer.

Even for someone so diabolical, Mephisto never moved people by force. I remembered him once telling me that he got satisfaction out of a tragicomedy only when there was real emotion behind it. That was why I was certain that sending children out as a vanguard was Lizer's own idea. This included the other children from the orphanage who he and Maria both treasured. I guess that, in the end, no one mattered to him except her.

But...Maria herself had a hard time accepting this.

"That's not true...! He would never...!"

To Maria, Lizer was an honest soul, like the Champions in fairy tales. She wouldn't believe he was responsible for the mess in the city just because I told her this was the case.

...This was why this girl would soon experience terrible suffering. Her future pained me.

"...I initially told myself that I must not place a heavy burden on a child

as young as yourself,” I said. “However, we need you. You must see the situation with your own eyes...and make a decision.”

Would she follow alongside us or not? We were at a crossroads.

“H-help meee!” cried a voice in the dim sewers.

Soon enough, the source appeared from around the bend in front of us.

“*Huff, huff, huff...!*”

It was an adult man wearing threadbare and tattered linen clothing. He looked like some sort of vagabond. He came racing toward us. His face was marked with sheer terror, and he ran as if he was being chased by a monster.

“...Sorry, not *‘as if’* he was being chased. He is,” I corrected quietly.

Moments later, something else came rushing around the corner—a giant slug monster that crawled along the wall as it chased its prey. It was much faster than its fleshy appearance suggested.

“Eeeeeeeek!”

The man couldn’t hope to defeat this creature, but it was like a pest to us.

“*Flare.*” I cast out a fireball, careful to avoid the man. The fiery attack hit it dead-on, and the massive slug was incinerated.

“Wh-what?!” He glanced behind him and gave a cry of shock as he watched the creature die.

I approached the man. “Might I ask why you’re in the sewer?”

“...Huh?”

His expression all but asked aloud, *What are you talking about?*

““*Why*”? This is where all the adults end up. Even you—”

That’s where he paused. He spotted Maria and lifted one eyebrow.

“What’s a kid doing here...?”

“...I want to hear more about the situation.”

The man told us everything he knew. It was Lizer’s madness and malice.

“Once a citizen passes a certain age, they’re thrown into the sewers. No exceptions. Then...they’re forced to live in this monster-infested hell until the day they die.”

“Wh-who would do such an awful thing...?” Maria asked.

The man frowned and glared at the child, his eyes rich with envy, jealousy, and hatred. It was not the look you’d normally give a kid.

Growing fearful, Maria hid behind me. The man clicked his tongue before answering.

“The king. This was all his idea.”

Maria froze. “What...? L-Lizer did this...?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” His curt reply was coated with loathing.

The sheer intensity of his emotions served as proof enough. His cynicism was evidence of Lizer’s inhumane deeds.

But Maria refused to believe it.

“Lizer...would never...!”

The man clicked his tongue again. “...Anyway, thanks for helping me.”

With that, he left...still ticked off by Maria.

Olivia spoke quietly as we watched him go. “...So the kids live comfortably aboveground while the adults are forced to spend the rest of their lives here.”

“Well, that does sound like him,” Verda commented.

To Lizer, adults were the embodiment of evil. They were the ones who had taken everything from him, hence why he hated them. He brutalized them without a single thought of their humanity. He desperately hid this side of himself from Maria. It was proof of his own corruption.

“Lizer... But why...?”

Maria was shocked by the inconceivable truth...but her faith in him was cracking. Lizer had been Maria’s savior. To her, he was the holiest of saints.

And now, that image was falling apart.

“This is all a lie...” She closed her eyes and covered her ears to escape this reality, but it crept between her fingers.

...As we passed through the sewers, we rescued several more people. They thanked us with tears in their eyes, then...

“If I ever get out of here, I’m going to kill that king...!”

Every single person said the same thing...

“I’ll avenge my big sister...! The king is gonna pay...!”

...They voiced their hatred for Lizer.

“.....” Maria continued to walk with us. Her expression was empty, and it was impossible to tell how she was really feeling.

“Hey, Maria. You doing okay?” Sylphy asked.

She didn’t respond. We continued through the sewers in silence...

“This ladder will lead us to the palace.”

...We’d arrived at our destination. The ladder led us to a storage room, and from there, we found ourselves in a long hallway.

“...It’s rather quiet here.” I cast detection magic and picked up on only

one life-form. Most likely Lizer.

“I can’t confirm any other presences in the palace besides him,” I said. “But...”

“We better be careful. Even if we don’t detect anything, someone might be in disguise.”

I nodded at Olivia. “Sir Lizer is most likely in a first-floor hallway in the east wing.”

We proceeded slowly, keeping vigilant of our surroundings. You could hear a pin drop in the silence.

We were soon met...with a gruesome sight.

“Wha—?!” Sylphy’s eyebrows immediately knitted together.

No, it wasn’t just her. We all had on looks of distress—Maria, me, and everyone else.

“Are those corpses of children...?!” Ginny exclaimed as she broke out in a cold sweat.

Small bodies lay motionless before our eyes. Their causes of death were strange.

They appeared to be civil officials. Each one was hard as stone, and by their expressions, it appeared their souls had been pulled right out of them.

“They were so young...! This is vile...!” Olivia shouted, flushing with anger.

Sylphy, Ginny, and I felt a surge of righteous indignation...

But what was Maria thinking through all this? What sort of emotions churned in this pale young girl who trembled?

...I could only pray that the worst would not come to pass. Keeping at our current pace, we approached the sign of life—presumably Lizer. The closer we came, the more corpses we found. Then—

“A-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” cried a young boy.

In the middle of the long hallway was an old man...squeezing the child’s head with both hands—

“No, this isn’t it, either.”

At that moment...a pure-white aura was sucked out of the boy’s mouth and absorbed into Lizer’s body. The boy became a corpse like all the others...and he was thrown against the wall.

“Li...zer...?” Maria’s voice echoed through the hallway.

“Oh?!” He reacted quickly, spinning around to face us.

Sure enough—

—this man, Lizer Bellphoenix, had turned into a monster.

CHAPTER 92

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Whereabouts of Love

He looked like a ghost.

Lizer's cheeks were sunken in, and his eyes glowed in their deep sockets. His hair was falling out in patches. Drool spilled from the corner of his mouth. He was senile, it seemed.

Gone was the shadow of the veteran hardened by war. All that was left was a pathetic old man consumed by madness.

"M-Mari-Mariaaaaa..." The corners of his mouth curled. Saliva oozed from between his lips.

Lizer slowly staggered toward us.

"Keh-keh, heh-heh-heh, ha-ha..." Lizer chuckled eerily, and his eyes locked on to Maria. I turned to face the old man and felt the presence of an Evil God.

It was him. He was right there with us. Mephisto Yuu Phegor was inside Lizer Bellphoenix.

The devil was staring at us from within him. By peering into Lizer's eyes, I could feel Mephisto's dark intentions.

"So it's the climax of our little drama.

"Will you follow the script, or will you rewrite it?"

"Either way, I hope this game will be fun for us, honey."

As usual, he saw people only as his toys. And I would crush his reign of evil at any cost.

"...Is everyone ready?"

"Obviously."

"Just say the word!"

"I hate getting all serious...but I guess I don't have a choice, huh?"

I stared down the enemy, growing confident in my friends.

“No, no... What’s going on...?” Maria looked bewildered, sweating from fear.

“Why that face? Why, why, why, why? Why are you making that face at me? It’s strange. We’re finally together again. You should be smiling. Why aren’t you smiling? Why? It’s not right. Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why——?”

“...Please don’t worry. We will protect you.” I stepped forward to defend her.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. I—I see. I see, I see, I see. It-it-it-it’s you. You. It’s your fault, isn’t it? Yes, yes, I’m positive. U-ugh-ughhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…”

“Whaaaaaat did you dooo to Mariaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!”

Lizer was impossibly fast. The sallow man moved like a wild animal.

Lizer closed in and swept his right arm sideways. He was aiming for my head. His speed was overwhelming. I couldn't dodge. Thus, the only option was to defend. I cast *Wall*—

Lizer's right arm slammed into my protective film and pulverized it. The impact carried through and went straight for my head.

I jumped to the side, and seconds later, Lizer's arm struck the side of my temporal lobe. The impact rattled my body, and in the blink of an eye, I felt like I was floating, flying like a piece of scrap paper in the wind, before breaking through a wall and leaving the palace altogether. I crashed into the courtyard and rolled along the ground for a while. I had jumped to the side

prior to the impact, so the damage was minimal. Still, I could tell I had a mild concussion, and my vision was unfocused. I needed to take a few deep breaths and calm down—

“Arrrrrrrrrrrd Meteooooooooooooooooor!”

Apparently, I wouldn’t even be allowed a single breath. The crazy old man came charging after me via the tunnel carved by my body.

“...You never let up, do you?”

When the fuzzy form of the enemy took shape in my blurred vision, I launched a counterattack—a barrage of elemental magic, twenty-seven circles around me, fifty-seven more to encompass Lizer. I cast a total of eighty-four spells, calling up a maelstrom of destruction.

Fire, wind, earth, water, lightning. The flurry of five major elements covered a wide range—including the courtyard, which was reduced to an empty plot. The scene looked like a battlefield, but...

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Even after taking a blow that would drive back the largest of armies, Lizer pressed onward. There wasn’t a scratch on him. His white priest robes weren’t even singed.

However, I had bought myself some time.

“I’ll crush youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!”

As he came closer, the giant mace that appeared in Lizer’s right hand swung down. Avoiding it was easy enough; my brain was already stabilized and back to normal. I dodged his swing, and it dug impressively into the earth.

“Hmph. I knew it would be a challenge to take you on my own. However —” I watched the clods of dirt fly in all directions and took a steadying breath.

“I, Ard Meteor, do not stand before you alone.”

Just as Lizer went to prepare his next attack...

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Sylphy let out her wild battle cry, raining chains down on Lizer.

The Divine Chains of the Shackle God. The Armor snapped in to capture the enemy.

“Nghhh!”

The chains shot through the empty air. Sensing danger, Lizer jumped back to put distance between him and the Armor.

—That was where *she* was waiting.

“Aaand lightning!” Verda shouted, her upper body peeking out of some midair portal.

She used the Mirror Shield of Omniscient Reversal. Its light flashed and engulfed Lizer; then...

“Oh?” Half of Mephisto’s body protruded from Lizer’s.

Determined not to let this opportunity go to waste, Olivia vel Vine stormed in and closed the distance in a millisecond. As soon as the enemy was within reach of her blade, she took up her weapon...and unleashed the Supreme Sword of Destruction. The jet-black blade could slice and annihilate all creation. And its current target was...

“It’s over...! Mephisto Yuu Phegor!!”

The devil’s astral spirit was now detached with the power of the Mirror Shield. Mephisto possessed Lizer’s body after casting aside his own physical form and becoming a spirit. If they could separate the two and cut him with the Supreme Sword...this battle, at the very least, would be theirs. That was all it would take.

“Heh-heh. It’s not over just yet.” Mephisto’s spirit retreated into Lizer’s body as he jumped back.

Olivia’s attack missed him by only a hair.

“Nooo! We were so close!”

“True, but now we know there’s hope.”

“...Right. We have a sufficient chance.”

“Let’s get payback—a hundred times over!”

My friends and I surrounded Lizer...

“Now!”

On my signal, we all moved as a unit. While issuing orders to everyone, I would act as a decoy and engage in guerrilla warfare alongside Ginny. As soon as Ginny saw an opening, she would use the Divine Chains to bind the enemy. Verda would then cast the Mirror Shield and separate Mephisto’s astral spirit. Finally, Olivia would use the Supreme Sword to rend his spirit in half and end the battle.

—I hoped it would work out that way...but we were dealing with the greatest psycho. A monster who we risked everything on before and *still* couldn’t beat.

So obviously, it wasn’t going to be so easy.

“Aaaaaaaaargh!!”

We completely missed our target. Just when we thought we had finally beaten him to the punch—with him surrounded and cornered—it fell apart at the next moment. Our situation only continued to worsen, and there was little sign things would improve.

“If I could just chant my *Original*...!” I exclaimed, involuntarily clicking my tongue.

Private Kingdom was our best chance of survival. The problem was that our enemy was swifter than I’d expected, so attempting it was a risk.

“I don’t even have time to invoke it...!”

The chant required ten seconds to complete, depending on my mental state. Every nerve in my body would be focused on this task during that time, so it created a long opportunity for the enemy to get me. If this was any other lower-ranked fighter, I might be able to chant and deal with them at the same time...but there was no chance of that this time around.

Still, casting an *Original* didn’t guarantee victory. Mephisto had wormed his way into Lizer, and there was no question that their spirits had merged. As long as that bond was solid, separating them with the Mirror Shield was meaningless. They’d quickly rejoin, like they had just demonstrated.

“I knew it. To weaken their connection, we’ll need...”

Maria. The key rose to my mind...

“That’s enough...! Stop it, Lizer!” the girl cried out sorrowfully.

The man immediately seized up.

It wasn’t anything the rest of us did. Lizer stopped fighting and looked at her.

“Ohhh, Maria...! What’s wrong...?! Why are...you crying...?!”

Tears soaked her cheeks.

“Did someone...make you cry...?! Th-that’s unforgivable...! How dare they make Maria...!” Lizer’s face twisted.

The trembling girl looked straight into his eyes. “*Why are you doing such horrible things?!*”

Maybe Lizer was suddenly forced to realize he was the one to blame. His mouth was slack in shock, and he stared at Maria.

“I finally know why I was feeling so off all this time...!” she lamented. “It’s because you were hiding things from me, Lizer...! The wicked parts of you, all of it! Everything—every single little thing! You hid them from me!”

“M-Maria...?”

“Why?! What’s the point of this awful stuff?! *How* can you do such things?! You’re making everyone suffer! You’re making them cry! You even hurt everyone from the orphanage! I don’t know you at all, Lizer!”

“I—I...! I did everything...*everything* for you! To bring you happiness! That’s what all this is for!” Lizer said, breaking out in greasy perspiration. Like a sinner pleading his innocence. “Y-you were happy, weren’t you?! I resurrected your friends! I made you into a Saint! I made your ideal world! I did as you wished! A-and yet.....you look at me like *this*!!”

Maria’s eyes were a muddled dark gray as she stared at Lizer. What emotions were roiling inside her heart?

...It was at least safe to say there was nothing positive in there. For Lizer or us.

“Yeah, I’m the bad one.”

“...Maria?”

“That’s right. Yeah. I was bad. I understand now. I’m sure this is my fault. It’s all my fault. After all, *I didn’t tell you something important back then.*”

“Wh-what are you talking about...?”

“I’m to blame for all this. This happened because of me. Everyone else had to suffer because I’m here. Even you, Lizer... I should have never been born.”

“.....! D-don’t say that! It’s not true!” Lizer’s eyes shot open as he approached Maria.

She held both arms out. “Stay away!” she shrieked tearily. “Everything is my fault. I’m to blame. But I still...I still can’t forgive you, Lizer.”

She choked on her sobs. “I liked you. I loved you. That’s why...I’ll never forgive you. I’ll never forgive you for hurting everyone, Lizer...”

Maria gritted her teeth and glared at the old man across from her.

“I...hate you, Lizer!”

Fatal words. It was more than enough to break Lizer’s heart.

“U-uwagh...! Agh, aghhhh, *aghhhhhhhhhhhhh*...!”

He gripped his head and wailed in frenzied agony. It was the sound of his soul cracking.

“G-gah... Ughhh... *Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*”

Just then, Lizer’s whole body floated into the air and up toward the sky.

—This was bad.

Sensing danger, I instinctively called out, “Please come here!”

As unsettled as she was, there was no way Maria could move herself. Upon reaching the same conclusion, everyone raced over to her. Just as we all clustered together...

“*Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!*” Lizer screamed up in the sky, and something strange began to happen to his body. A dark aura swallowed him, and then—

The energy swelled.

It bubbled and fumed. The black silhouette grew. It expanded to the size of a small mountain, then stopped.

“Wh-what’s going on, Ard...?!”

“Well, I can’t imagine it bodes well for us.”

As if to confirm this theory, the aura dissipated, revealing...a grotesque titan with a towering body.

Its statuesque figure was a monotone gray and reminiscent of a soldier’s naked, chiseled form. It glowed like a burning ember from head to toe. Six arms sprouted behind it, and each gripped either a sword or spear. Two arms growing from its shoulders were immobile and clasped together in prayer in front of its chest. There were four faces around its head, each revealing individual expressions of agony, sorrow, dejection, and rage.

“Gya-hya-hya-hya-hya! *Someone’s* wearing their birthday suit! You’re buck naked, Lizer!”

“This isn’t a time to be laughing...!”

“Uh-oh, this doesn’t look good!”

“A-Ard...!”

Danger. My heart pounded.

“*Giga Wall!*” I cast a defensive spell without a second thought. It was the best my current form allowed.

Multiple layers of *Giga Wall* manifested above our heads to create a thick barrier. Then...

“*Come, destruction.*” The ghastly titan spoke in a penetrating, cold voice, then—

It emitted light beams from the six weapons in its six arms. It was an

indiscriminate attack. The blazing heat that the behemoth fired upon the earth destroyed everything in sight. The palace was obliterated in an instant, leaving not even rubble behind. The capital itself turned into a devastated wasteland. Amid the vortex of chaos, we were the only ones who remained untouched. Nevertheless, it was a close call.

“Geez! That was reckless...!”

I had created the toughest shield possible with layers numbering in the hundreds of millions. Yet, even that would have been pierced through if I didn’t constantly repair it. This ridiculously catastrophic power was already fearsome enough, but...

“Hey! Th-the mountains! The mountains are disappearing!” Sylphy exclaimed.

The peaks and hills towering in the far-off distance were vanishing before our very eyes.

“So his power *and* range are both insane...!”

“Wow. The teacher’s going a liiiiittle overboard.”

“A-at this rate, the whole world is gonna be annihilated!”

What Sylphy said was hardly an exaggeration. Back in Mephisto’s heyday, the world *was* in constant threat of destruction. And—

I (the Demon Lord) and Lydia (the Champion) were always the ones to put down this Evil God’s violence.

“...Lady Olivia, Lady Verda, Sylphy. Please hand me your Armor.”

I began equipping the Supreme Sword, Mirror Shield, and Divine Chains and turned to Maria. She was trembling and crying. Were those tears on her cheeks a sign of her fear? Or—was she regretting her words?

At any rate, we were at a critical juncture. Our fates would be decided here. Whether we would win and save everything or fail and lose it all depended entirely on Maria.

“...I’m about to head into almost certain death. I hope to save everyone and bring back stability,” I stated, staring at the young girl before raising a certain issue. “Should Sir Lizer be included among the rescued? ...What do you think, Maria?”

“Huh...?” she asked, rubbing her swollen red eyes as she looked at me.

“I vow to defeat this evil and return the smiles to everyone’s faces. That being said, I have a question for you. Is Sir Lizer a fragment of menace that ought to be vanquished? Or is he a victim worthy of salvation?”

Her answer would decide everything. I continue to nervously watch Maria. Then...

"...I think what Lizer did was truly deplorable," Maria said with a downcast look and quivering lips. "It's appalling...and unjustifiable...but..."

"...But?"

"I said I hated him...! I made that clear...! And yet, I...I still want to forgive Lizer...! After all, this is my fault...! Not Lizer's...!"

Maria's tears spilled over, and she continued to voice her feelings.

"Lizer...! He's my Champion...! Even if he does these terrible things...! I can't...I just can't...bring myself to hate him...!"

In that next moment, her words, her decision...were definitive proof of our victory.

"Please...! Save him...! Save Lizer and everyone else...!"

I patted the girl's head. "Leave it to me."

My words were simple but heartfelt, and I turned my gaze skyward. The titan's destructive potential seemed limitless, and I could sense Lizer's agony within.

"Are you smiling, Mephisto Yuu Phegor?"

The devil's glee was equally palpable.

"...I'll see you all later." I cast magic and rose into the sky.

"We're counting on you."

"Sock him for me!"

"May you be victorious...!"

"Make it quick. Y'know, like ya always do."

The voices of my friends gave me an extra boost from behind. As soon as I left the protective membrane, a deluge of light beams came crashing down on me. I evaded them at the last second and glared at the goliath.

"...Ah, I knew it. You *are* smiling, Mephisto Yuu Phegor."

I soared fearlessly upward to the monster in the sky, and rays of heat formed clusters to shoot me down. Each one was bursting with his malevolence.

"It's useless."

*"Your fate is sealed.
"There's no happy ending.
"Nothing you do will rescue Lizer.
"You can't save anyone."*

...No. You're wrong. Nothing has been decided. This is far from over. But if you still think it's funny—

"—I'll wipe that damn grin right off your face."

I gave my enemy a cutting look...then invoked my chant.

"All roads lead to despair.

"That is the way of life for a pitiful man."

I thought about him as I readied my greatest asset, Lizer Bellphoenix.

"In complete solitude is he.

"For there are those who follow his lead

"But none to rule together with him."

He was a man who rose to prominence in my army and quickly became a Heavenly King. I distinctly remembered his first audience with me. The eyes of that man who tepidly swore loyalty to me were cold as ice and, more than anything—brimming with grief.

"There is not one who understands.

"All are eager to leave his side."

I couldn't figure out why at the time, but I simply labeled Lizer as odd and made no attempt to comprehend his true nature. This was even truer once he became my enemy.

But after peering into Maria's memories, I came to understand this man. I grasped the root of his sorrow, which was why I could no longer see him as my enemy.

"Cast away by his one and only friend,

"He sinks into a sea of madness and isolation."

Lizer and I were alike, just as Maria said. We were born from nothingness, lived in solitude, finally found an end to our misery—whereby we lost everything.

We were one and the same. Completely consumed by thoughts of those who have departed and only able to look backward. Living like emotionless dolls as we made the same mistakes.

“Rest without peace. Drown in anguish and despair.”

Back then, there was no one who could stand in my way. I wished for failure. I begged for someone to stop me. Yet no one did.

—That’s why I’ll be that person for you, Lizer Bellphoenix.

“That which guides this tale.”

I’ll be your salvation. You can still go back. To Maria. To those you love. Lizer Bellphoenix, I won’t let you repeat my mistakes. I won’t let you suffer the same fate. That’s why—I’ll unleash my power.

“—Private Kingdom—the Story of a Lonely King!”

CHAPTER 93

The Ex–Demon Lord and Where Love Leads

—It is far better to die never gaining what you wished for.

Up in the blue sky, the deformed monster looked down at the world below as it unleashed its wrath. Its savagery was its lamentations made material.

There was rage. Dejection. Sorrow. Agony.

Something that had filled the void within him had been lost for good, which was why Lizer Bellphoenix was afflicted by such grief.

By having it once, he had discovered what it felt to be content.

Losing it had taught him the pain of deficiency.

It was for this reason he told himself that he never wanted to lose it again, but...

“Not much you can do, honestly. Feelings are doomed to fade over time.”

The devil’s voice echoed in his mind. It felt extremely unpleasant at first, but he’d grown used to it. In fact, he now found it comforting.

“Do you know what humanity’s favorite words are? *Love* and *hate*.”

“Both are intense, difficult to suppress...and guaranteed to disappear someday. When you kill someone, they can’t keep screaming forever. When you love someone, you can’t keep whispering sweet nothings to them for the rest of time.

“Either emotion can vanish at the slightest provocation...and open a hole in your heart. The pain of losing love is especially harsh. It makes you want to curse the god who invented such an emotion in the first place.”

There was a ring of authenticity in the devil’s voice. That mad creature must have experienced love and lost it as well.

—Just like him.

“It hurts, doesn’t it? You’re sad, aren’t you? It’s such a letdown. And more than anything else—irritating.

“This world is all wrong. Lizer. You have the right to relieve your pain.

Go on—destroy everything.

“That’s the only way to heal your heart. Return all to nothing, including your own heart, and then...

“...you will be saved—at last.”

Just as the devil said, Lizer sought salvation in nihilism. So he would lay waste to everything—use this omnipotent strength to sow destruction.

“Come, come, destruction. Come, come, salvation, come.”

The six arms growing from his back squirmed, and beams of light burned the earth.

And in the midst of this...

“Stop, Lizer!” called out someone in the sky.

An instant later—a tangle of chains zipped through the air to restrain the titan. Sensing his peril, Lizer used teleportation to avoid the onslaught. Then he spotted the face of his foe.

Ard Meteor.

Not Ard the villager. Ard with Stage III of his Brave Demon Full Body transformation. The Demon Lord reborn.

Raven garments draped over his slender shoulders. Glossy silver hair flowed down to his waist. Face like a collection of all things beautiful. In his right hand was a black blade, and Divine Chains snaked around his arm. In his left was the Supreme Sword and the Mirror Shield.

When Lizer sighted that figure, the beams of light—fired randomly until then—found a target. Bent on destroying him, the heat rays zoomed straight for his odious enemy.

“You’re virtually the same person. You both felt like your hearts were lacking and desperately struggled to fill the void.

“But...your paths and destinations were polar opposites.

“He gained all kinds of treasures. Even after he lost them, he kept finding more...and he’s found happiness now.

“You, on the other hand? ...You keep losing. You haven’t gained anything. Your life is one big failure. Isn’t it maddening? Aren’t you jealous? It’s horrible, isn’t it?

“—You want to destroy him, don’t you?”

Ahhh.

I do. I do. I do. I do. I do.

I do want to annihilate that privileged man, that detestable existence. I’ll

shatter every fragment of him.

“A-a-a...aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Agony. Sorrow. Dejection. Rage. The four expressions were united by one will. A will called murder. In Lizer's current state, he had the power to accomplish that. All opponents could be taken down.

Or so he'd thought.

—So why was this man still alive? Why couldn't he kill him?

Every beam missed its target. His murderous attacks bore no results.

—*Why?*

—*Why?*

[illegible]

“Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!”

The atmosphere trembled with his screams. Ard Meteor answered this explosive display of emotions with a certain coolness.

“Right now, you have no heart. There isn’t even a glimmer of your former beliefs in you.”

He kept dodging the lights, evidently unbothered.

“You hoped to guarantee a good future for the children. I never thought your resolve, ideas, or beliefs were correct...but they were radiant. Your clarity was brilliant. That’s why I saw you as a threat. However—”

His silvery hair rustled in the wind, and the distance between them shrank.

“You could have all the power in the world, but without any beliefs, you’re just an empty threat. You cannot lay a finger on me.”

The man was calling him harmless, a weakling. This filled him with uncontrollable rage.

“Disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear...!
Disappeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!!”

Fire raced through his heart. Any remaining iota of composure was gone. It was a desperate act of aggression. Light beams scattered as he tried to shoot down the enemy who buzzed about like an irritating fly. The tiniest scratch would spell Ard's end. Lizer's power could do that easily.

And yet, he couldn't achieve what he wanted.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh! Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!”

He was like a child throwing a tantrum. This allowed his foe to draw close and—

“Aaaah. He’s got us,” Mephisto said.

Just then, the Divine Chains wrapped on Ard’s right arm snapped around him, and he skillfully moved in, avoiding the beams.

Lizer had nowhere to run. The Divine Chains multiplied, shackling the titan. Writhe as he might, they would not yield. In fact, the chains only grew tighter.

“Graaaaaaaaagh...!”

He couldn’t produce more light beams. He could no longer fight.

Is this how it ends?

Even as the vessel of his heart flooded over with regret and immeasurable anger, Lizer was consigned to death. Even so—

“Listen, Lizer Bellphoenix. I didn’t come here to get rid of you.”

His enemy wasn’t making any sense.

“I’m going to save that heart of yours by letting you know the truth. *That’s* why I’m here.”

In that moment—an image flashed in Lizer’s mind.

“Heh-heh-heh, did I do a good job?”

“I think I’m pretty good at magic!”

...It was Maria. These were her memories.

“U-ughhhhh...! S-stop...! No moooooooooooooore!”

It hurt. It hurt too much. His heart felt like it would split apart. Why was he showing him this?

“To correct the misunderstandings between you two. First, you should know exactly what went wrong.”

More of Maria’s recollections played out in Lizer’s mind’s eye.

To her, their days were happiness exemplified. She used to think he was a strange old man...but she saw the darkness that haunted his heart and couldn’t leave him alone. When he saw her self-sacrifice, Lizer responded in kind. It didn’t take long before he learned to smile and felt warmth in his heart. Within a year of their meeting, Lizer became a large part of Maria’s life. And that was why she wanted him to stay with her.

However...because he was so important to her, Maria had told herself that she had to respect his wishes.

...This was a huge misstep.

Her memories from a certain day started to play. Several days before Lizer lost everything, he had made a sudden announcement.

“I’m considering joining Varvatos’s army. Then I can turn this world into a paradise.”

From Lizer’s perspective, this would allow him to fulfill Maria’s dream. Maria did lament their cruel world and wished that everyone could live happily.

But...Maria was aware these dreams were found only in fairy tales. She never expected it to come true. Her real wish...was for Lizer to stay with her at the orphanage forever.

But because Maria loved Lizer, she thought it was only right that she hold back her tears and see him off.

“...I know you’ll be like a Champion, Lizer. I’m rooting for you.”

Maria regretted those words. She wished she’d never said them. She was certain this was where they had gone wrong, and this miscommunication tormented her.

—Lizer was shocked by this revelation.

Maria thought she was the one who made a mistake? No. That’s wrong. I’m to blame. I assumed she was being supportive. I believed my choice would make her happy.

...Lizer couldn’t help but feel disgusted by his past wrongs. Everything that Mephisto had said was true.

“It’s always been one-sided—you only care about yourself. And the fact of the matter is that you don’t understand her at all. You don’t love Maria. You just love loving her—”

...He was right. Lizer didn’t see Maria for who she was. He knew nothing about her. If only he’d realized her true wish...then maybe he wouldn’t have lost everything.

If he had chosen to stay by Maria’s side, perhaps she wouldn’t have died.

Then her friends, the children at the orphanage who had become family to him, wouldn’t have burned to the ground. This was all his fault. Every mistake was his own.

—There was no way that she could love someone like him. Despite thinking the world of Maria, Lizer had misunderstood her, never realizing her true feelings... This was why he had spilled a sea of blood. If no one had expressed any skepticism, he wouldn't have even noticed his own sin. Who could love a man too hideous for words?

“What I should destroy...”

...It isn't the world. The real threat is the existence of this stupid old man.

The weight of his transgressions weighed heavy on Lizer. He realized he would atone in hell, and he was about to take his own life, when—

“That's exactly why you're an idiot, Lizer Bellphoenix.”

Lizer was baffled. Wasn't he going to say, *You must realize your crimes and pay the price?*

“My aim is to correct this misunderstanding and convey the truth... Open your heart and hear Maria's true feelings.”

A moment later, the memories and emotions came flowing into him once again. These were from a short while before. She was in tears after rejecting him.

“Why is he doing such awful things? ...Why didn't I stop him?”

Lizer wasn't the only one she blamed.

“This started with my mistake.

“If I had told the truth and said I wanted him to stay, I'm sure Lizer never would have done this.

“...It's all my fault.”

Maria blamed herself more than anyone else, and her heart had never cast Lizer aside. No matter his sins, no matter how deeply he despaired, no matter how much he changed for the worse...

“Lizer is my Champion.

“He was always with me.

“He gave me strength when I was hurting.

“He made me laugh when I was sad.

“He was the first to bring me happiness. That's why...

“I could never hate him.”

...Ah. So I'm a fool. I've been wrong about everything. I didn't

understand Maria's feelings. I haven't lost her love.

There was no void. Now I'm just embarrassed that I couldn't see it sooner

"Oh dear. What are you getting so choked up about?"

It was the devil.

"This is your only chance. The time is now. I can't say what might happen later. There's no guarantee your love will last after this. In fact, it's doomed to fall apart. After all, no matter how you try, people—"

Ard Meteor cut Mephisto off. "You're right. People's hearts are fickle. All emotions disappear at some point. But...who cares if love isn't forever? Any nihilist who insists that love has no value because it's fleeting is a fool," he proclaimed, thoroughly crushing the devil's plan to change Lizer's heart. "Even if a catastrophic future is to follow, the glimmer of love is no less beautiful. Wouldn't you say that love's transience makes it more precious and irreplaceable?"

Ard Meteor pointed at the monster within the titan. "You excel at reading people's true nature. Your skill in infiltrating Lizer's heart and using him for your machinations was impressive...but your words are mere sophistry. Fools are easy to deceive, but know that there are no fools here now."

Ard's gaze was elsewhere. He spoke to the second heart within the titan, now free of its wicked assassin.

"The darkness in your heart is gone."

"—Don't make any more mistakes, Lizer Bellphoenix."



The strange colossus before me was now perfectly silent. Its body, bound by the Divine Chains, lost all strength and its intimidating look.

This is the finale, I realized.

"It's not enough."

His voice sounded from the disfigured leviathan. Mephisto had likely gained full control of its body. The titan surged with power as he tried to cast off the Divine Chains.

"...This isn't like you," I said. "The story is over. Are you still going?"

"Yeah, I know. It's not like me at all. After your words touched Lizer, I

was ready to accept a pathetic defeat. I figured losing to you would make me happy enough... But..."

Mephisto now had full control of the giant. He sounded like a petulant child.

"It's not enough. Not even close. I want more. I want to have even more fun. I want to play with my beloved honey forever. It sucked to be locked away for thousands of years. The prison was torture—so boring to me."

He must have thought to himself that he needed to create more surprises, more pleasure.

I shrugged and shot right back at him. "I will say one thing. You can't concoct the unexpected on your own. It always comes out of nowhere... Just like right now."

No sooner had the words left my lips than Mephisto froze.

"O-ohhh? This is..."

The devil looked confused and agitated—two emotions that had never crossed his face before.

"I have done some reflection."

Lizer Bellphoenix. His drive allowed him to wrest control from the Evil God.

"I have made countless mistakes. But never again. I will not fail twice...!"

Now that Lizer's heart was far beyond Mephisto's wicked reach...

"Do it...! Ard Meteor...!"

He was free.

I readied the Mirror Shield on my left arm...and activated it.

Almost instantly, it forcefully ripped apart the evil spirit that clung to Lizer's heart, Mephisto Yuu Phegor's astral spirit.

The titan's body crumbled into clods of dirt, plunging into the ground. He was right there before my eyes, and I refused to let him get away. I wove between the chunks of raining mud—and flew straight toward my greatest foe.

"My, this *is* a surprise."

He looked elated—thrilled. Like he was having the time of his life. Mephisto Yuu Phegor gave a splendid smile, as bright as any angel's. Then—

I thrust my weapon—the Supreme Sword in my left hand—stabbing my longtime enemy.

"It's over," I declared in a curt, definitive tone.

Anything pierced by the Supreme Sword was doomed to disappear. There was no escape. I was certain Mephisto was no exception.

Sure enough, his body began turning to particles and dissolving from the feet up. He was vanishing forever from this world.

And yet...the devil was smiling. He placed his pale hand to my cheek.

“It’s not over yet. So long as you’re around, I’m immortal.”

Then...

“Let’s play again, honey.”

“I’ll pass.”

I wrenched the blade lodged in Mephisto upward. His body was split in two, dissolving instantly. The motes were uncomfortably brilliant, and remnants of him showered down on me. I brushed them away with my hand and groaned.

“*“Immortal,*’ huh? There’s no such thing.”

I directly challenged his claim.

“—I’ll end you someday. I swear it.”

CHAPTER 94

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Salvation of the Failure

Once the battle was over, I looked below me. The dregs that comprised the titan were still raining down—and Lizer Bellphoenix was plummeting headfirst.

Was he trying to die?

I flew over to him.

The damage below us wouldn't be an issue. Megatholium was basically an open field from all the destruction anyway. There were no things to be broken, no people to hurt with our descent.

I cast a spell on Lizer and slowly guided him to the ground. He landed facedown, then turned his head to look at me.

“...Why didn't you let me die?”

I answered with a tired sigh. “I told you, didn't I? *‘Don't make any more mistakes.’*”

Lizer must have thought death was the only way to absolve his sins. He thought this was the best way, even after he'd factored in Maria's grief over losing him. How stupid.

“Death is an escape for you—just another method to run away. Sure, your crimes are worthy of this punishment. However...you must search for forgiveness anyway.”

His life would surely be a living hell. He'd wish he was dead. But even so...

“You must continue to live. You must continue to suffer... That is both our fates.”

I'd made plenty of my own mistakes. My sins were far greater than Lizer's. My heart ached with their presence.

“When we're met with misfortune, that mental anguish will be twice as painful for us as for others. And even if we are blessed with happiness, the weight of our sins will spiral us into suffering... Such is our punishment.

Until the day that death grants us a fitting end, we have to go on.”

Lizer said nothing. There was resignation in his eyes, and he simply stared at the blue sky. At any rate, this matter was settled. All that remained was—

“If it’s the Strange Cube you’re after, I have it in my possession.”

I heard a familiar voice and looked toward its source.

There stood a single beauty. An elegant outfit in crimson tones. A tall, slim frame. Glossy black hair. Unearthly looks. I glowered at the figure and whispered the name.

“...Alvarto Egzex.”

He chuckled and revealed the block in his hand—the Strange Cube.

“I can hardly bear to tell you this after watching your efforts against my former master...but I will. You might have performed splendidly this time around, but I’m afraid there is no reward prepared. Unfortunately, this was a wasted effort.”

As he said this, he sent the Strange Cube off to his stronghold. The square in his hand vanished.

“...So while we were busy fighting the enemy, you were busy taking advantage of the situation. I’m surprised, actually. You’re not one to play such a minor role.”

Alvarto’s eyes narrowed at me, and he laughed darkly. “Don’t be so mean. You should understand my heart better than anyone... I could hardly bear to stand by. How many times did I hold myself back as I watched you all? If possible, I longed to abandon my position and rush over to fight by your side. Like that final battle. Nostalgic, huh?”

There was a tinge of remorse in Alvarto’s smile. He, too, shared a connection with Mephisto. He wasn’t lying. Nonetheless...

“Right now, I’m head over heels for *you*, not my former master. Abandoning everything to destroy that Evil God is the dumbest idea in the world.”

This man had prepared for thousands of years—not to defeat that accursed demon...but me, the Demon Lord. Alvarto’s heart was set on this.

“...Dealing with your attentions was the worst part about the ancient world.”

“I might say the same thing, my Demon Lord. Falling in love with you has been the worst thing that’s happened to me.”

I let out another heavy sigh and looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Are we done here? If so, begone. We’re enemies.”

“You’re so cold, my Demon Lord. I came all this way to stir you up.”

“What do you mean?”

Alvarto grinned. “I thought you might be tired from your battle with the Evil God. I wanted to raise your morale... Seeing *her* again should have an immediate effect.”

As soon as he said this, a mirror appeared in front of me—*vista magic*. A beautiful girl was slumbering on a bed.

“Ireena...!”

Twinkling silver hair. Porcelain skin. Glossy peach lips.

All the details in front of me were infallible proof.

“Lovely, no? I switched out her school uniform for a wedding dress. She’s like Sleeping Beauty... You know, I enjoyed a full view of her naked body while I was dressing her. And, wow...she’s blessed.” He placed his hand to his lips with a lascivious smile.

I scowled at him. “Very well. If you wish to declare war, then I accept. You’ll regret being born by the time I’m done, so prepare yourself.”

The daggers I glared at him would have killed.

However, Alvarto wore a pleasant grin. “Right. I’ve been waiting. No time to waste. Otherwise...I suspect the situation will deteriorate by the second.”

Then Alvarto disappeared along with the mirror.

“Damn. We have to hurry up and save her. Who knows what other humiliation he’ll put her through?” I muttered.

Still staring up at the sky, Lizer spoke quietly. “...I, too, will put forth my best efforts in this battle. Just like when I once fought in your name.”

“I’m counting on you.”

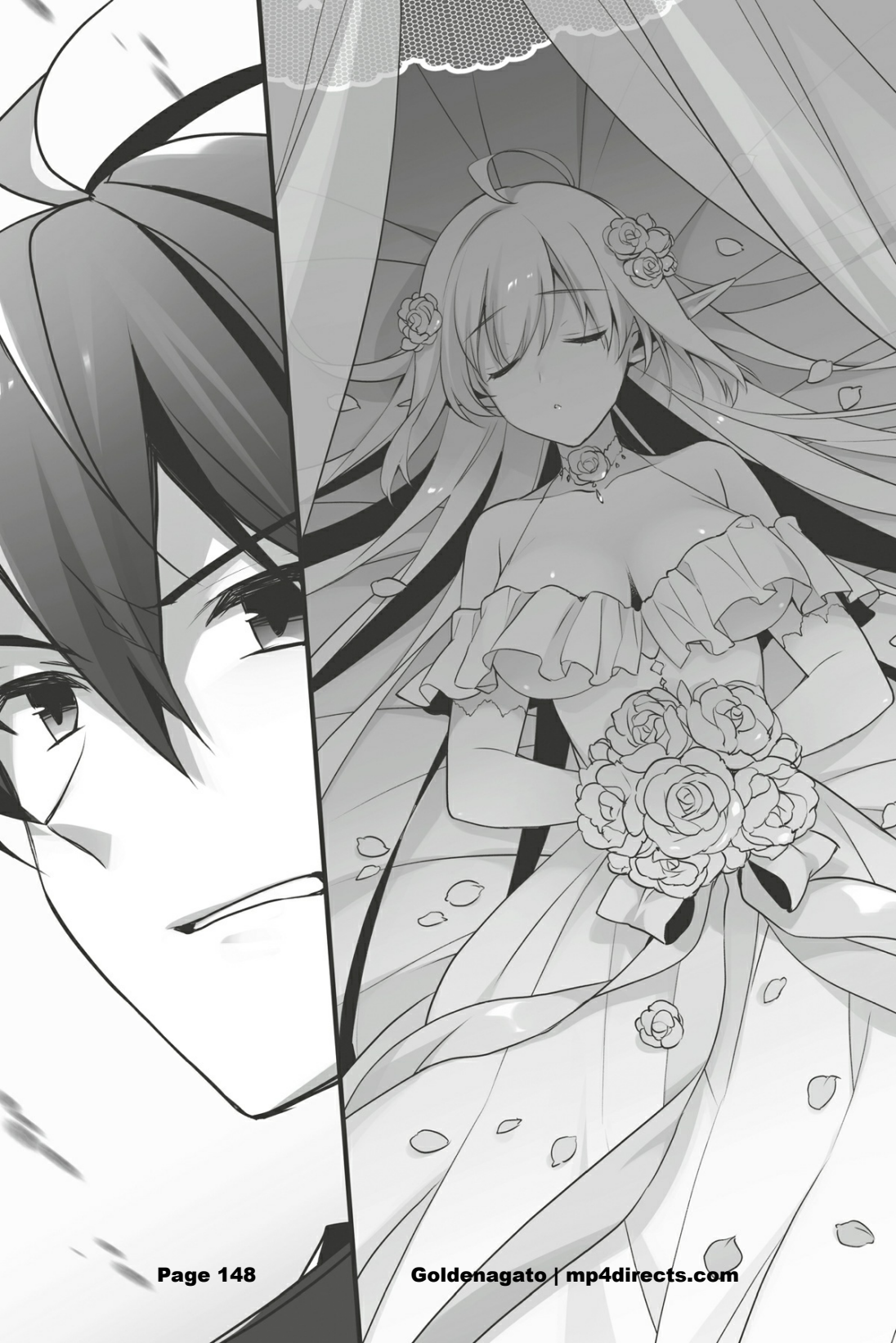
It hurt that we’d failed to recover the Strange Cube, but now we had another ally.

“I’d like to think the net positive will balance out to zero.”

I, too, looked up at the azure sky with an exhale.

“Hang in there, Ireena...!”

Determination to save my best friend raged within me like a fire.



AFTERWORD

It's been a while! It's me, Myojin Katou.

Autumn. Most people would associate the season with the changing of the leaves.

But that has no place in the life of a shut-in like me. But I can still feel the seasons transitioning, however.

—Thanks to the crickets.

Ever since I was little, chirping crickets have always reminded me of autumn. There's something distinctly autumnal in Japan about hearing the crickets *from a distance*.

But you know, in moderation.

I'm charmed by their little chorus, when at an appropriate range. This year...I think they've spawned some delinquent crickets... Haven't they heard of social distancing?!

They've set up camp by my outdoor AC unit, which is right next to my bedroom, and continue to chirp day and night. I can't sleep! My brain is dead. I can't get any work done...

This isn't cute! It's torture, you little shits.

...Please forgive my coarse language. In any case, it's no exaggeration to say I'm going insane. You know, crickets gave me my insect-o-phobia when I was a kid, but I guess I can't afford to just sit around and complain.

It was time for me to pick up my weapon and fight. Prepared to face my trauma, I readied my pesticide, gave a mighty battle cry—and now I hate autumn.

Wow. Winter is the best season for humans. I wish it was winter already.

All right, on to my thanks and apologies.

Thank you as always to Sao Mizuno for the wonderful illustrations. I thought I might have given you the toughest character design challenge yet, but you blew my expectations out of the water. Leave it to the experts!

A heartfelt thank-you to both my editors. To my former editor, I appreciate your patience and for never giving up on me. I hope we can meet again sometime. To my new editor, I'm certain I'll be causing you a lot of trouble in the future... I hope you'll forgive me.

Finally, to all the readers who picked up this book—I apologize for the delay. I hope you'll continue this journey with me.

I pray that all crickets will be wiped off the face of the earth as I pen the next volume.

Myojin Katou

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