

# High school

# 14



MAGES OF CAREER  
COUNSELLING

**ICHIEI  
ISHIBUMI**

ILLUSTRATION BY  
**Miyama-Zero**



PARENTAL ADVISORY  
**WARNING**  
EXPLICIT CONTENT





High school  
**DxD**  
14  
MAGES OF CAREER  
COUNSELLING







*MAGES OF CAREER COUNSELING*

14

**ICHIEI ISHIBUMI**

ILLUSTRATION BY  
**MIYAMA-ZERO**

  
New York

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Volume 14

Ichiei Ishibumi

Translation by Haydn Trowell

Cover art by Miyama-Zero

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We'll show them how strong we young demons really are.

We'll make them regret turning against Kuou Academy.

## Life.0

Early one morning, a decent time after the anti-monster crisis in the underworld...

“This *is* my room, right?”

I found myself in such an incomprehensible situation that I had reason to doubt reality.

“Zzz... Zzz...”

“...Issei.”

The sounds of Rias breathing and Asia muttering in her sleep teased my ears as I lay in bed. I always slept next to the two of them. That was my usual bedroom scene.

It was everything else that was the problem.

“Issei... Hold me tightly...” Akeno was delivering some overly sensual lines in her sleep...

“Zzz... Zzz...” Xenovia had dozed off with her clothes in disarray, her stomach completely exposed...

“Heh-heh-heh. The *manju* buns in heaven are so delicious...” Irina was holding Xenovia like a pillow, drool running down her chin...

“Meow...” Koneko was sleeping curled up like a cat...

“...” And Ophis was lying on her back, her hands pressed together like someone at their own funeral.

Yup. All were lying sprawled on my bed.

Huge though the mattress was, it wasn't large enough to accommodate this

many people... It was literally packed to the brim with young women.

I had lost my place. More accurately, when I woke up, I was lying flat on the floor. Xenovia's tossing and turning had probably kicked me out. Her stretched leg practically gave it away!

So many girls were in *my* bed! I should've been jumping for joy...and yet I had never felt so alone. No matter how you looked at it, there wasn't any room for me!

I let out a resigned sigh before climbing into a nearby chair.

It had been this way every morning since that anti-monster attack in the underworld. Before I knew it, the girls had made my bedroom their own, all of them sneaking in while Rias, Asia, and I were sound asleep.

For some reason, they'd all become a whole lot more daring ever since they came back from the dead... More physically demanding, too. For the most part, this mostly manifested as little things rather than anything overly erotic, such as competing to see who got to walk beside me on the way to school in the morning...

"It's *my* right to walk beside him, Akeno. That won't ever change."

"Not so fast, Rias! Oh-ho-ho! He's got a right *and* a left side, you know. If you have the *right* to walk beside him, then I'll walk to his *left*!"

My Two Great Ladies positioned themselves on either side of me!

"Ugh! Issei's arms are already taken, Xenovia!"

"Even the smallest opening can prove fatal, Asia. We've got Issei's back, though. What do you think, Irina?"

"As a last resort, we can always ride on his shoulders!"

The Church Trio—Asia, Xenovia, and Irina—had clearly done their research and knew that Rias and Akeno would always make the first move! But there was no way I could walk into school arm in arm with two gorgeous beauties while giving three others a piggyback ride!

Even during club activities at the end of the day, the girls were still causing trouble.



Upon seeing Koneko make herself comfortable on my lap, Ravel leaped into action.

“I’ll sit there, too! It isn’t fair that you get to hog him all the time, Koneko!”

Ravel settled on my legs! The soft sensation of her buttocks pressing against my knees was incredible! And yet...

“Ravel! This is my spot!”

“I—I want to sit here, too! I’m always so jealous whenever you get to sit with him like this!”

My cute underclasswomen started fighting while sitting on my lap! And then...

“I—I want to sit on his lap sooo badly...”

“I will, too.”

Not to be left out, Gasper and Ophis were eager to find a spot on my legs, too! By the way, Ophis often jumped to the club room by teleportation array.

I was so glad they all wanted to get closer to me!

Still, this was going to prove difficult. I only had one body to go around.

I’d tried discussing this issue with Azazel and Rossweisse, but...

“Well, you see, they didn’t know whether you were alive or dead for a while, so they’re clamoring for you more than ever now that they’ve got you back. It’ll pass. Just keep ’em company until they cool down. This is the time to show what you’re made of. Know what I mean?” said Azazel.

“Your masculinity is being tested right now, Issei. If your dream is to one day become a harem king, consider this a valuable opportunity to practice managing a group of demanding women. If you can’t maintain a fair and even balance, some of your girls may end up feeling depressed... Oh, why am I entertaining such a dirty topic? I wonder if being around you and the others has changed me... You know what? As a teacher, I need you to know that while you’re the Breast Dragon, you must not broadcast your private life in front of your fans. Especially not impressionable young children,” Rossweisse cautioned.

They both lectured me at length. I was left to question the underworld’s

education system. How had it failed so terribly to let kids make Breast Dragon a smash hit?!

Anyway, I knew the road to becoming a harem king would be fraught with difficulty. Each time I got caught in a spat between the girls, I found myself helpless!

I decided to try asking my good friend Kiba how he dealt with his insane popularity among the non-demon girls at school.

“I guess I’m just used to it... I know this probably isn’t much help, but I find it kind of unsettling when lots of women start clamoring around me. After a while, I started to figure out small ways to smooth over problems. I’ve learned to say ‘yes’ when I can and ‘no’ when it’s too much to handle. It’s best for all parties concerned to be clear and honest in your rejections rather than dragging people along with vague responses.”

He wasn’t just a pretty boy, he thought like a genius, too! Of course someone who’d had women bare their hearts to him countless times and turned them all down would have the best advice!

I had to refuse things that were beyond me... But facing the disappointed faces of the girls in the Occult Research Club was too much! I needed a different strategy!

However, Kiba wasn’t finished. “By the way, Issei. Would you like to have lunch with me...? I’ve tried a few new recipes and prepared a bento box. I’d love to hear what you think of them...”

This bastard kept turning down all those girls chasing him, but he was chasing me! *Don’t choose me over them!* Seriously, I was starting to get freaked out by how pushy the male members of the Familia were getting with me!

I didn’t know what to do! If a girl on my left needed saving, I’d want to help her even if the girl on my right commanded my full attention. I’d push myself way beyond my limits because I was a useless guy who lacked the ability to address his issues properly! Having so many alluring ladies in my life contributed to my impulsive actions, too, of course.

Still, Rossweisse was right. I needed to find a balance.

Yes, the courage to say “no” was an absolute necessity for anyone dreaming of becoming a harem king!

While I sat in my chair, head in my hands, I gazed upon the female army asleep in my bed. This was simply too much for me!

Look, for as overwhelming as this was, the scene was a real treat... Akeno’s and Xenovia’s pajamas were disheveled, all but falling off their bodies, half-revealing their amazing breasts and thighs, inviting me to take a closer look!

Rias and Akeno were wearing semi-transparent negligees! The tips were showing through! Thank you, both of you!

Akeno usually wore a *yukata* gown to bed, so the sight of her in a see-through garment was simply dazzling! And it suited her so well! Yes, seeing an ample-bosomed woman in a negligee packed a mighty punch!

Then there was Xenovia in a T-shirt and underpants! A view for the senses!

Irina wore regular pajamas, as did Asia. That was probably par for the course for church-goers. It was cute, in its own way.

Koneko was also in pajamas today, an adorable little set complete with a cat pattern!

Last but not least, Ophis. She sported black pajamas. I suspected she came to sleep here simply because everyone else had.

Ever since she’d moved in with us, she followed us practically everywhere, imitating our actions.

She was a blank slate, pure and innocent like a baby, not to mention easily deceived. No wonder Vali wanted to protect her.

Ophis was strong, pure, and incredibly gullible. She’d been tricked into aiding terrorists, and carried the potential to throw the cosmic balance into absolute chaos.

In short, I suspected that she only thought to sleep in my bed because that’s what everyone else did. Well, she *did* seem rather fond of me...

A sudden knock at the door made me jump slightly.



“Good morning, Issei, Rias, Asia... Are you all awake?”

It was Ravel. She was the only one missing from this marvelous scene.

“Ah. Come in,” I answered.

She stepped inside, her eyes widening in shock at the sight of my bed. “Wow. I—I didn’t see *this* coming... I wish I could’ve joined...”

Her voice was touched with surprise and a bit of regret. Hey, the bed was already past capacity! Add one more and where would I sleep?! On the floor?! In the end, I—the supposed owner of this room—had been left with no choice but to lay on the floor and watch the girls! This was no harem! I was at a total loss!

“Yaaawwwnnn...”

Ravel’s entrance must have roused Rias. She looked back and forth between me, Ravel, and the state of the bed with sleepy eyes.

“...What a sight,” she remarked with a weak grin while looking over her female Familia members.

Ravel, looking like she’d suddenly remembered something important, proceeded into the center of the room and shook Koneko by the shoulder.

“By the way, Rias,” Ravel began, “didn’t you say we might start seeing mages soon? And then there were those vampires, too, right?”

Oh yeah. Not long ago, Rias mentioned that we needed to have a talk about the possibility of mages reaching out to form pacts. She’d also mentioned something about vampire visitors. The mage thing I understood, but vampires...? Were they from Gasper’s family, the Vladis?

I tilted my head to one side in uncertainty.

“As his manager, I’ll let you explain the mage situation to Issei, Ravel,” Rias said.

Ravel puffed out her chest, responding with a forceful nod. “Leave it to me! As his manager, I, Ravel Phenex, will select a mage suitable for the Red Dragon Emperor!”

Oh! So my cute little underclasswoman had happily declared that she would step up on my behalf! Being a relatively new demon, a reliable manager sure was a great help! In fact, Ravel's assistance had already proven invaluable during the mid-level demon promotion exam.

When she stuck out her chest like that... Her bosom lent her a remarkably assertive atmosphere despite her small physique!

"First things first, let's wake up everyone and go down for breakfast," Rias said while I was busy admiring my underclasswoman's bust.

So began a new day. Any hope of a peaceful morning was quickly dashed when an unexpected figure appeared behind Ravel—a raven-haired beauty dressed in a kimono.

"Hiya! I let myself in, *meow*."

—!

The *nekomata* woman!

"K-Kuroka?! Wh-what are you doing here?!"

Even Rias was taken aback. Ravel literally jumped into the air from shock.

"Wh-when did *you* get here?!" she exclaimed.

"Ah. Greetings. I also showed myself in." A mage in a pointy hat stepped from behind Kuroka—Le Fay. The girls from Vali's team had decided to drop by my house. Where were Vali and the others?

"The rest aren't coming, *meow*," Kuroka answered, as if reading my mind.

Ah, so it was just these two. Good. I didn't want to face my rival so early in the morning. That jerk had set his sights on me for no reason at all! Kiba, Sairaorg, Cao Cao, Vali. Why did I have to be so popular with guys?! I didn't *want* guys! I wanted girls!

"Kuroka... Why are you here?" Koneko asked, crawling out of bed as she rubbed her eyes.

"Why? I thought you wanted help improving your sage arts? You should be grateful, *meow*. Oh, I'm borrowing one of the spare rooms. This should be a fun

stay!”

A fun stay?! Taking one of the spare rooms?! Sure, we did still have a fair number of vacant rooms on the sixth floor, but she couldn’t just decide to move into the Hyoudou home without asking!

I clutched my head in my hands.

Le Fay timidly raised a hand in the air. “I—I heard you might be negotiating with mages, so if it isn’t too presumptuous of me, I thought I might stay on as an adviser... I-it wouldn’t be any trouble, would it?”

I could see how that might be helpful.

Rias let out a deep sigh. “Trouble or not, what are you, allies of the White Dragon Emperor, doing in our house? Isn’t this enemy territory for you?”

Kuroka approached Rias and started patting her on the head. “You worry too much, Switchy. *Meow*. That’s why so much energy that ought to be in your brain ends up pouring out of your breasts,” she said, prodding Rias’s chest and sending it bouncing.

Rias brushed the hand away. “Mind your own business... And ‘Switchy’?! Wait... Don’t tell me you left a marker for a teleportation square the last time you visited?!”

Kuroka bobbed her head. “Bingo! Basically, we can drop in at any moment. Which means we can use the huge bath here whenever we feel like it.”

Talk about scary. We’d let Kuroka hide here, and she’d used that act of kindness to set up a backdoor entrance! I could only hope she wouldn’t misuse it...

Le Fay broke the silence by holding out an envelope. “Oh, um, here. It’s a letter from the former fallen angel governor.”

*From Azazel?* I took the envelope and opened it.

KUROKA AND LE FAY FROM TEAM VALI WILL BE VISITING, SO BE NICE TO ‘EM, OKAY? THEY WON’T CAUSE YOU ANY TROUBLE, SO TRY TO GET ALONG. YOUR ESTEEMED TEACHER, AZAZEL.

“Ngh! Damn him, deciding everything by himself again!”



There was nothing I could do other than throw the letter to the floor in exasperation. For whatever reason, Azazel had a soft spot for Vali, even though he was my rival.

“We’ll keep out of your hair, so don’t worry about us. That cool, Switchy? I’ll make sure Shirone gets proper training.” Kuroka winked and put her hands together in mock supplication.

“...Do whatever you want,” Rias answered, placing a hand on her forehead. “But I want you to take care of Koneko properly, okay? And to lend us a hand when we need it. Give and take—that’s the demon way.”

It sounded like we’d be seeing more of these two.

Life at the Hyoudou residence was about to get even livelier.

# Life.1

## Demon Days

Recently, I've found myself greatly enjoying my time at school.

Maybe it's because we'd faced so many powerful enemies lately and my body had been destroyed not too long ago. I guess that would reinforce anyone's appreciation for ordinary life.

Everyday lessons were enough to set my heart at ease. Before being reborn as a demon, I used to find English and math classes so unbearable that I spent most of the time praying for them to end early.

Ah yes, there was nothing better than peace. My dearest wish was to enjoy a normal school life then do some simple demon work late at night to end the day.

That said, being a demon was obviously very different from how I'd passed my time as a human last year... Extraordinary events kept popping up one after another.

Evil gods, descendants of ousted Demon King bloodlines, and god-slaying Longinuses! Just give me a break! All I wanted was to enjoy myself with Rias, Asia, and the others, and to get into some raunchy action every once in a while. If the only fights I found myself in from now on were Rating Games, so much the better!

Then again, I wouldn't have been promoted to mid-level status so quickly if not for all those battles...

Would I be raised to high-class demon soon if things continued like this?

Azazel had already advised me to start considering potential career paths once I became a high-class demon.

During recess, I found myself staring at the sky outside the classroom window.

*Career paths, huh?* I was already more than halfway through my second year of high school, so it was time to get serious about my future. I'd been to career counseling a few times and had chatted with my parents about it. I'd even filled out a survey meant to figure out what route I should take.

In the human world, my next goal was to be accepted into Kuou Academy's university department. So long as I didn't mess up big time, that wouldn't be a problem. In the demon world, however...

I was obviously aiming to be a harem king! But that didn't really give me much guidance on how to live my life.

First, I was committed to helping Rias realize her own dream of being the champion of the Rating Game. To support her, I would give every battle my all.

So that was my plan as a member of her Familia... But what about when I became a high-class demon in my own right?

At that point, I'd become independent and gain my own Evil Pieces... But it was all so vague. I just couldn't picture the future in any great detail.

Azazel had warned me that when I set out on my own, I'd have to keep a steady source of funding on hand. Basically, if I was to maintain my own Familia and my own territory, I needed to support them all.

It wasn't like I didn't have any money. I'd received a portion of the Gremory family's royalties from the *Breast Dragon* franchise, so there was that.

It all went into my demon bank account; the one Rias had prepared after recruiting me. Everyone in our Familia had one for their earnings from demon work, plus television residuals in my case.

My savings had already reached an impressive sum...but as I was still a high schooler, Grayfia managed it in my stead. I was grateful for her help, honestly. Left to my own devices, I would lose all sense of fiscal responsibility.

When I won my independence, I would use that as my war chest! Still, there was no telling whether it would be enough, so I needed to start saving now! Every yen mattered!

I'd learned another important lesson about reincarnated demons from Kiba's

swordsmanship teacher, Okita.

Demons who were previously human tended to act hastily.

Relentless pursuit of a goal at a young age could end up leaving you brooding with too much time on your hands later. After all, demons were remarkably long-lived.

Not only that, it could also lead to burnout and emotional problems. Okita had explained it was better to strive for slow, steady progress and enjoy one's life as a demon.

Would I really burn out if I became a harem king too quickly? It was hard to say, but assuming I live for ten thousand years, hitting that goal after a hundred, or even a thousand, might be realistic.

Yep, the rest of my life seemed impossibly distant. I'd have to find other goals and dreams to make sure I didn't let it go to waste. To start with, I wanted to enter the Rating Game with my own Familia and win a few titles!

Before that, I'd have to become a high-class demon, though. For whatever reason, I felt like I couldn't discover new dreams or goals until I made my current ones a reality. But if I was going to live as long as everyone said I would, I needed other things to do! I had to find them!

No sooner did I think as much than something started coming into view, something I could work on right now!

I'd live as a member of Rias's Familia! And at the same time, I would keep saving—one yen at a time!

That had to be enough, right? Of course it was! There was nothing else to do but cross my fingers and hope my school days would remain calm and uneventful!

While striking a victory pose in my mind, someone came up behind me and smacked me on the head.

"Ow! Who was that?!" I spun around to find Matsuda and Motohama, both visibly trembling in anger!

"You!" Matsuda demanded, drawing close. "What's all this about you and



Ravel Phenex in first year?!”

*Ravel?*

“Huh? Oh, I knew her before she transferred in. Her family asked me to look out for her, so that’s what I’ve been doing.”

We’d bumped into Ravel during our trips to the underworld, and her mother had asked me to help her out. She was my underclassman at school, so of course I had her back! Although technically, she was also my manager, so maybe it was *she* who had *my* back...

Motohama seemed barely able to control himself at my last response. “Y-you got her parents’ approval...?! What the hell?! You’ve got Asia, Rias, Himejima, Koneko Toujou, Xenovia, Irina...*and* Ravel Phenex?! They’re all practically Madonnas—way out of your league! What gives?!”

“You guys have got to stop with those overreactions of yours,” came a new voice. “It’s getting tiring to watch.” Kiryuu, our class’s Perverted Glasses, appeared out of nowhere. “Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but beautiful women are suckers for weird guys,” she continued, watching on through half-lidded eyes. “They must all be hopelessly attracted to Hyoudou’s *special something*.”

What on earth was my “special something” supposed to be...?! M-maybe it *did* have something to do with all those crazy incidents I kept getting caught up in!

““Ah. I see.””

The two numbskulls pounded a fist into an open palm as if it all made perfect sense. Damn them! *What* made perfect sense?!

Matsuda hung his head. “It just isn’t fair! If that’s how it works, shouldn’t Motohama and I get something, too?! We’re just as perverted as he is!”

“Exactly! Neither of us has ever scored with a beautiful woman! What gives?!” Motohama nodded as tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Hyoudou must have gotten them all. In other words, he’s even more perverted, even stupider, than both of you, right?” Kiryuu patted my friends on the head.

Ngh! How was that supposed to be comforting?! So I was perverted and stupid, eh?! I couldn't deny it! If that's what brought me closer to Rias and the others, then I'd wear those labels proudly!

"I hope the Lord blesses Matsuda and Motohama one day...," Xenovia said with a sad look in her eyes.

"Maybe I should bring it up with Lord Michael the next time I see him?" Irina remarked.

*Really?! You're telling me you'll ask the archangel of all heaven to bless those two?!*

"Matsuda, Motohama, would you like to attend mass with us sometime? If you're depressed, spending time with everyone might help ease your minds a little."

*Asiaaaa!* She probably didn't even realize she was proselytizing! All three members of our Church Trio hadn't noticed the cultural gap!

Kiryuu's glasses abruptly locked onto me from the side, glimmering brightly. "By the way, Hyoudou. Are the rumors true?"

"Wh-what rumors?" I replied nervously.

"That you're on a first-name basis with Rias now?"



That question instantly caught the attention of everyone in the room!

Everyone stared at me, whispering things like “Right, I heard about that,” or “That’s what I wanted to know!”

S-seriously?! Everyone at school was gossiping about me?! Well, I suppose I *did* accidentally refer to her by first name a couple of times. People had noticed already? Man, I couldn’t afford to let my guard down!

We’d agreed that I would refer to her as *the prez* at school and as *Rias* in private, keeping the two separate at all times, but I’d screwed up royally!

I racked my brain to come up with an excuse, when...

“Issei, Asia, Xenovia, Irina. I was hoping to discuss something with you.”

Kiba poked his head in from the entrance to the classroom! Perfect timing!

“A-ah! Kiba! I’ll be right there! Come on everyone, let’s go!” I hurriedly pushed Asia and the others out through the doorway!

“Hey, Hyoudou! Answer us!”

*I can’t, Kiryuu! I wish I could, but if I did, everyone would treat me as Public Enemy Number One! So just let me date Rias in secret!*

-○○●○-

After school, the members of the Occult Research Club gathered in the club room. Rossweisse, having just finished attending a staff meeting, came to join us not long after.

After checking to make sure everyone was present on one of the sofas, Rias rose to her feet. “Okay, I called you all here to announce that, starting today, we’ll be available to enter into pacts with mages.”

*Pacts between demons and mages.*

I swallowed hard. Mages and demons had a long and deep relationship. The exchanges between the two groups are very different from the wishes and contracts we dealt with in regular demon work.

Essentially, mages are relentless seekers of magic, dedicated to constantly honing their research throughout their lives.



There was black magic, white magic, summoning magic, spirit magic, rune magic, and many other varieties, too. Mages typically focused on one school.

However, research could be a highly personal and secretive endeavor, and precisely how it was conducted varied from person to person.

As for what was expected of any pact between mage and demon...

“There are three main reasons a mage might seek to form a pact with a demon,” Rias explained. “The first is for protection, so they can call on a powerful demon for backup if they get into trouble.”

“That kind of makes us out to be like yakuza,” I noted quietly.

Rias laughed “Indeed.” She raised a second finger. “Second, to acquire knowledge. More specifically, demon technology. This kind of aid can prove invaluable for a mage’s research.”

If that’s all they cared about, they could go to the underworld directly or get their hands on what they needed via other avenues. At least I assumed so.

Apparently, those methods came with considerable risks. There are few ways to reach the underworld. We could only venture back and forth so freely because we were members of a high-class demon’s Familia. Acquiring permission was no easy feat for a non-demon mage.

Needing to be part of a demon’s Familia could prove problematic in certain cases, like with stray demons.

I’d needed to go through a simple registry process on the train during my first trip to the underworld over summer vacation. Mages were vetted more intensely, however. They needed to carry a pass from someone famous enough to have left their mark on mage history, but even that came with considerable limitations.

In other words, it wasn’t easy for those who weren’t demons or fallen angels to simply visit the underworld... People like Vali only managed to get in through sheer brute force.

In that sense, there were some mages who managed to enter the underworld via powerful teleportation magic. Anyone who did was regarded as a threat by

demon society and the leading mage organizations. Unsurprisingly, Vali was in that camp. Basically, entering illegally was most definitely a bad idea.

When it came to receiving a special pass from another faction, the problem was the exorbitant fee intermediaries demanded. If someone wasn't careful, they might end up paying more than the value of an entire life's worth of research, or even that of your every possession combined.

Take Phoenix Tears, for example. They were considered a luxury, even in the underworld. For a mage, they were super rare to a factor of ten.

Forging a pact with a demon to establish a direct exchange channel was the most effective approach to getting tears, though even then, it would be a costly transaction.

"Finally," Rias continued, raising a third finger. "To put it simply, mages may want to enter a pact with a demon to increase their status. After all, having a powerful demon on your side can be a great asset. Even my father and mother have made pacts with mages. Every now and then, they have to respond to a summoning. That's one of the duties high-class demons and their Familias must attend to."

Now that Rias, the daughter of the esteemed House of Gremory, had reached the appropriate age, she, along with the members of her Familia, were eligible to be summoned by mages. Hence this meeting.

Xenovia cocked her head to one side in consternation. "I never would've imagined a mage would want to summon me."

*Right. Same here.* There was no way I could see myself coming out with a line like *Bwa-ha-ha! Who dares to summon me?* to some mage.

Rias let out a small chuckle. "Typically, humans involved with the supernatural do the summoning, and demons and monsters answer the call. So I want you all to give any potential pacts a good deal of consideration. Once a pact is made, it can't be undone easily, and you'll have an obligation to fulfill your responsibilities. If you enter into one with a mage of low caliber, it will reflect poorly on you. Choose your partners wisely, and only settle for the best. Mages may seek to use us to further their magic research, but for demons, this is strictly business. Making contracts with regular humans and entering into pacts

with mages are what a demon does.”

"""""""""Yes!"""""""" we answered our master in unison.

Right, that was all only natural. None of us would make it to high class if we didn't take this next step.

*A pact with a mage...*

I would just have to find the best possible partner!

*Hopefully, a beautiful witch!*

*Oh, Mister Demon, can I ask a favor of you?*

*Of course. But in exchange, you'll have to let me fondle your breasts.*

*Oh, Mister Demon! You're so naughty!"*

*Ahh. Excellent.* That was the kind of business partner dreams were made of!

“...You’re having dirty thoughts, aren’t you?” Koneko, sitting on my lap, pinched my thigh! She was so strict about these things!

Rias looked up at the clock hanging on the wall. “It’s almost time. The head of the Council of Mages will be contacting us shortly via a magic circle, so be on your best behavior.”

I'd have to be careful. Koneko leaped from my lap and positioned herself next to me.

Once all our members were properly seated, a large magic array appeared on the floor of the club room, slowly filling it with pale light.

“That’s Mephisto Pheles’s insignia,” Kiba whispered to me.

*Mephisto Pheles? Isn't that the name of a legendary Extra Demon from outside the Seventy-Two Pillars? I'd heard the ancestor of the Hero Faction's mist user, Georg, had entered into a pact with him.*

While I was busy contemplating, a three-dimensional projection appeared from the magic circle.

The image was of a middle-aged man seated on an elegant chair. His hair was a vivid mix of red and blue, tightly coiffed, and his angled eyes were of similar

shades—blue on the left and red on the right. Overall, he exuded a mysterious and intimidating aura, reminiscent of Ajuka Beelzebub in some respects. He didn't take long to smile, though.

*"If it isn't Rias. It's been too long,"* he greeted.

Huh. I had expected something more imposing. Honestly, this was a relief.

*"It sure has, Mephisto Pheles,"* Rias responded.

*"Ah, you're every bit as beautiful as your mother. Your grandmother was gorgeous, too, as was her mother."*

"Thank you," Rias replied before moving the conversation to introductions. "Everyone, this is the Extra Demon and director of the Council of Mages, Mephisto Pheles."

*"Ah, how do you do? I'm Mephisto Pheles. If you want to know more about me, just read up on the relevant literature. There are plenty of books out there about me."*

That was an awfully cocky thing to say, wasn't it?

I guess he led the mages. I never would've imagined a demon might have taken the top job.

Ravel offered a quiet explanation from beside me. "They say that, after entering into a pact with the first Georg Faust, he remained in the human world after the death of his summoner and continued to hold his position as the head of the Council of Mages."

Hmm. It kind of sounded like he was fond of life in the human world.

"He's independent, right? He doesn't belong to any of the noble houses, does he?" I inquired.

I'd never heard of any noble House of Pheles.

Rias answered, "Mephisto Pheles is one of the oldest and most senior among demons, and he spends most of his time among humans. Also, he's Tannin's King."

Well, *that* was a surprise!

This guy had recruited old Tannin into his Familia way back when!

*“I offered Tannin my Queen piece, you see. He expressed a desire to aid endangered dragon species. Oh, he’s such a paragon of virtue. Well, I myself don’t engage in Rating Games, nor do I meddle in the affairs of the underworld, so I generally allow him the freedom to do as he pleases.”*

So Tannin was a Queen! That explained why his abilities were so well-rounded. This conversation just went to show that important info came from the most unexpected talks. And it was kind of cute hearing that old-timer being referred to as a Queen!

Ravel leaned in to provide a little more information. “I heard Mephisto Pheles belongs to the same generation of demons as the original Four Great Demon Kings. Apparently, he didn’t get along with them, and they had a falling out. That’s why he went into hiding in the human world.”

So that’s what happened. Hold on, so he was basically classmates with the original Four Great Demon Kings?! Just how old *was* he?! Sure, he *looked* old, but I couldn’t begin to guess how many years he’d been alive!

Then again, demons are fully capable of changing their appearances, as are angels. Azazel and Michael were probably around the same age, and they both came across as young men. If you asked me, there were far too many people up there in years who acted like kids!

Mephisto Pheles nodded, seemingly having overheard Ravel’s whispered comments. *“Yes, yes, precisely. I simply couldn’t stand those fellows. That’s why I adore our dear Sirzechs and Serafall. They’ve been so supportive of my endeavors. Those wretched former Demon Kings, on the other hand, were far too demanding, constantly barking orders left and right. Quite tiresome, I must say. While Ajuka and I have our differences, I don’t dislike him, exactly.”*

In other words, he was in good standing with the current demon authorities.

*“Ah, young Rias, how truly delightful of you to indulge an old man and his stories. Your grandfather, your great-grandfather, and your great-great-grandfather were also remarkably insightful. I wonder, how are your esteemed grandparents faring? It’s been quite some time since they retired, hasn’t it?”*



“Y-yes. They live peacefully in a remote corner of the Gremory territory,” Rias replied.

*Huh...* I hadn’t met her grandparents yet. But I suppose that was only natural. She told me once that when one family head passed their title to the next generation, they entered secluded retirement.

Rias had already contemplated life after retirement a few times, mentioning that she’d like to live in Japan. She certainly thought far into the future, seeing as she hadn’t even been named family head yet. That wouldn’t come until after she fulfilled her dreams and responsibilities. How many hundreds or thousands of years away was retirement? What would Japan even look like after so much time? I couldn’t begin to imagine.

Rias and Mephisto Pheles shared a few more anecdotes, chatting casually and discussing the current state of the mage industry.

“Have you spoken with Sona recently, Mephisto Pheles?” Rias asked at one point.

*“Not yet, I’m afraid. It seems she intends to speak with me after recruiting new companions into her midst. I have, however, discussed matters with Sairaorg Bael and Seekvaira Agares.”*

“I see. Yes, I heard she’s set her sights on new Familia members.”

Another surprise. So, the chairwoman’s Familia would be growing! I knew she hadn’t used all her Evil Pieces yet, but it looked like it was finally happening! I couldn’t wait to meet them!

Supposedly, she’d add a new Rook and Knight. I couldn’t help but wonder if they were already enrolled at school. After all, there were a good number of students related to one supernatural industry or another at Kuou Academy.

*“You young fellows, the Rookies Four, are incredibly popular in my industry and others, too. My people have been incessantly poking and prodding, demanding that I quickly reach an agreement with you all.”*

*Huh? The Rookies Four?*

That title was new to me, but Ravel leaned close to my ear once more to fill

me in. “That’s the name given to the four most outstanding young Familias currently making names for themselves—Sairaorg Bael’s, Seekvaira Agares’s, Rias’s, and Sona’s. Everyone says this is an exceptional generation, especially compared to other recent ones. Each Familia is still new, but has plenty of room to grow, and has gone far beyond the norm in the underworld.”

R-really? We were that amazing? I mean, Kiba and Sairaorg were both impossibly strong...

Suddenly, Azazel entered the club room and our meeting. “Sorry ’bout that, my meeting went overtime. Oh, if it ain’t Mephisto!” The second he laid eyes on the projection above the magic array, his lips curled in a wide grin.

Mephisto likewise raised his hand in greeting. *“Hello there, Azazel. It’s been too long. I’m enjoying the pleasure of conversing with Rias.”*

“Yeah, I hear it ain’t easy managing that Council of Mages. Anyway, you wanna grab a drink some time? I’ve got my hands on some real good liquor.”

Why did I get the impression these two had known each other for a while?

Turning to Azazel I asked, “Are you two friends?”

“Ah. We go way back. The Grigori kept in touch with Mephisto after he distanced himself from the old demon government.”

That was a pretty shrewd decision. Azazel seemed to have connections all over the place.

*“The Grigori’s information network has proven to be of great utility, Azazel. I continue to rely on it even to this day.”*

“You’ve been a big help on my side, too, Mephisto. You don’t know what a huge help it’s been having back-channel connections with the Council of Mages. And now with peace between the three great powers, we don’t even need to keep it hush-hush anymore.”

How they spoke about their respective organizations made me feel like the rest of us were invisible.

“What?! Seriously?! They turned down our offer of alliance, but they’re thinking about joining you?!”

*“Yes, but they’re still upset about that infamous dragon incident. Discussions have been brief. I don’t expect much to come from it. They reject any real interaction with us. It’s kept us from obtaining reliable data on the pantheons keeping themselves isolated.”*

“Right. Yeah. Most of the old mythologies have been giving us the cold shoulder, too. Rebel insurgents from their ranks could attack us, and their bosses would still play dumb.”

*“They closed their hearts to the likes of us after we stole the affections of their faithful. The angels, fallen angels, and demons are in a unique position where all other forces greatly despise them. How many myths have our three factions shattered, only to replace them with beliefs and legends of our own? Those who agreed to peaceful talks still likely harbor resentment for us deep in their hearts. We can only hope that the ruling deities from each mythology will see wisdom. We demons have lost our original Demon Kings, as heaven has lost God, weakening us significantly. I wouldn’t be surprised if our groups’ standings were challenged.”*

“Well, you’ve gotta keep on living, right? God and the Demon Kings are gone, but we’re still kicking.”

*“I’m quite fond of the current Demon Kings, so I have no complaints.”*

The two of them were talking at such a high level that most of what they said flew right over my head!

Perhaps sensing the silence that had fallen over the room, Azazel and Mephisto Pheles decided to move on to the main topic.

*“I do apologize for the digression, dear Rias. Allow me to send you detailed data on the various mages who wish to form pacts with you.”* With those words, Mephisto Pheles twirled his finger through the air and pointed toward us.

The next moment, a new magic array formed in the center of the club room. A whole stack of documents fell out of it with a *thud*!

Akeno and Kiba went to retrieve them, while the rest of us started sorting through the mountain of pages!

They just kept on coming, one stack after the next! Judging from their layouts,

they looked like résumés.

There were small portrait photographs of individuals who had to be mages in the top right corner of each top sheet in a set. Entries were written in demon script or letters I didn't know.

They were trying to sell themselves! Sections detailing an applicant's personal and family backgrounds, and they were bundled with all sorts of accompanying documents! Seriously, these things were résumés!

While I leafed through a few, dumbfounded, Kiba told me, "Things were different in the past, but these days, the first step for a pact between demon and mage is a paper-screening process. After that, the subsequent shortlist and final decision are left up to us."

*A paper-screening process! Whoa! Seriously?!* It was just like looking for a job in human society.

"Pact application is the mainstream approach nowadays, though I heard mages used to fight for them. It must have been a real bloodbath," Rossweisse commented, a pile of papers in her arms.

Fighting each other over demon pacts? It was hard to believe they would take it all so seriously! These pacts had to be huge status symbols! They probably ranked among a mage's lifetime achievements!

I continued to sort through the documents while processing this, organizing packets based on which of us a mage was interested in.

Unsurprisingly, Rias was the most popular. Her pile was growing sky-high!

Judging by his expression, Azazel had seen this coming a mile away. "Rias is this Familia's King, so all the interest in her makes sense. A pact with her means access to everyone else anyway. It'd also grant a mage an in with the House of Gremory."

He was right. A deal with Rias promised with all sorts of benefits.

"Which is why," Azazel added, "you'd better think extremely carefully who you're gonna go with, Rias. You also want to make sure they're plenty powerful as far as mages go."

“I know. I’ll take my time and choose carefully,” she said. There was no doubt in my mind that Rias would select an excellent mage.

The next most popular was Rossweisse! Maybe because she was also a magic user?

“I see. So they want to draw on my knowledge of Norse magic and my own research—particularly that on the world tree Yggdrasil, I assume?” She calmly sized up her own selling points.

Maybe Norse magic was a valuable commodity among mages? I remember hearing that the Norse were considered among the best in the business. Rossweisse’s nature as a demigod definitely helped, too.

“Valkyries reborn as demons are the rarest of the rare,” Azazel remarked.

*Ah, that made sense.*

Asia ranked third among mage interest, and I absolutely understood why. Given her Sacred Gear’s ability to heal nearly anything, it was only natural she would be flooded with offers.

“I—I wasn’t expecting this many... They really want *me*?” Asia looked positively stunned. Knowing how humble she was, I guess he never anticipated to be in such high demand.

*“The power to heal holds tremendous merit, my dear,” Mephisto Pheles said. “You will find that it’s the ultimate prize in any era. There will always be a great many individuals hoping to enter into a pact with you to reap the benefits of your abilities. Yes, with that power at your disposal, wealth should be effortlessly attainable, wouldn’t you say?”*

He definitely had a point. There were probably people the world over who dreamed about what Asia possessed. A pact with Asia promised to be a huge deal and could be used to earn unimaginable amounts of money.

“Asia!” I shouted. “Be careful who you choose! Don’t fall for some lying creep! I’ll help you look them over!”

I was so protective of her that I couldn’t help but worry. I didn’t want her to be deceived and wind up using her powers for an evil mage!



*“These individuals have already been screened by our association, so there shouldn’t be nefarious types among them,”* Mephisto Pheles pointed out.

Sure... But I had to make sure Asia didn’t get hurt.

“Don’t worry. Akeno and I will talk it over with her. We’ll confirm that the negotiations cover all the necessary bases,” Rias assured with a faint smile.

With our King and Queen watching Asia’s back, there was no need to worry. I hoped she’d find a good pact. Preferably with a female mage. I’d be beside myself if she ended up with a guy!

I ranked fourth in popularity, followed by Kiba, Akeno, Xenovia, Koneko, and Gasper, in that order. Gasper had the least number of applicants.

“It was never in question that Rias would get the most interest as the Gremory Familia King.” Azazel explained. “Plenty of mages will think that a pact with her means they can call on the rest of you as well. Then you’ve got Rossweisse, the master of magic; Asia with her Twilight Healing; Issei, the Red Dragon Emperor; Kiba with his Holy Demon Swords; Akeno, who’s Baraqiel’s daughter; and Xenovia, the Holy Sword user. You’d all be highly sought after. Koneko and Gasper haven’t had many chances to unleash their full potential yet, so that’s why there are fewer mages asking after them, but those who *did* probably have better eyes than most. Speaking of, the vast majority of mages who sent applications to Rias and the other big names are probably small-timers. I doubt there are more than a few serious choices among all those piles.”

Azazel sure knew his stuff. Then again, even I was smart enough to tell that most of the interested mages weren’t particularly amazing. So the reason Gasper had so few interested parties was because he still hadn’t shown off his true powers yet? Honestly, I was still in the dark about them.

*“Ha-ha-ha. Yes, the majority will be mere rank and file, I’m afraid.”* Mephisto Pheles, the leader of the Council of Mages, laughed, echoing Azazel’s remarks.

How could he say that about the members of his own organization?!

*“Despite his tremendous popularity in the underworld and his remarkable achievements, it appears that the nomination rate for the esteemed Red Dragon*

*Emperor failed to live up to expectations. Still, it remains more than sufficient, I dare say. Surprisingly, our younger members are less interested in him."*

"Mages care about status, but they're obsessed with appearances in magic society even more. This'll sound a bit harsh, but they want elegance, and they probably judged Issei to be too vulgar. His entire schtick is perverted techniques. Chalk it up to cultural differences."

Mephisto Pheles and Azazel were back to talking about us among themselves.

Let me just get this off my chest. As far as I was concerned, the underworld was a weird place for actually encouraging something as freaky as the Breast Dragon!

Mephisto Pheles cleared his throat. *"Now then, if you come across any noteworthy individuals among this group, it would be much appreciated if you could let me know."*

*"This group?" Meaning...?*

"Are there others, too?" I inquired.

It was Rias who answered. "Yes, of course. There's no guarantee we'll find suitable candidates this time, and even if we do, mages don't live nearly as long as demons. If we don't find anyone this time, we can simply request more applications later. And once anyone we've made a pact with passes away, we'd be free to make a new one."

*So that's how things work.* Basically, there was no need make a pact if we couldn't find anyone suitable. Plus, we could forge a new one once a current partner moved on.

"There are also occasions when a pact is only effective for a limited period. You might limit the relationship to one year, for example, or agree to terminate it if the mage is unable to meet your payment terms," Kiba added.

*We could limit our pacts or terminate them under certain circumstances?* This sounded just like business. Another avenue of our demon work, I guess.

All this time, I'd been under the impression our pacts would be like something from a dark fantasy. Eerie rituals in gloomy laboratories, summoning monsters

from magic arrays, ruthlessly enforcing evil contracts—that kind of stuff. But in reality, it was much more commercial.

Since there was no way we'd be able to carry so many files back with us, we sent them to my house via a teleportation circle.

Meanwhile, Mephisto Pheles turned to Ravel, who was busy helping us transfer all the documents. *"You there, you wouldn't perchance happen to belong to the Phenex family, would you?"*

"Y-yes. I'm Ravel Phenex," she answered politely.

Her manners were spot-on, as befitted her upbringing.

Mephisto Pheles stroked his chin. *"Hmm... This is extremely classified information known only to my organization, but perhaps you should know. Apparently, certain stray mages have been collaborating with the remnants of the Khaos Brigade, and they seem to have access to individuals associated with the House of Phenex."*

"..."

What an unsettling thing to hear.

"...What do you mean?" Rias asked.

*"You are aware that Phoenix Tears have surreptitiously been passed into the hands of those terrorists, I presume?"*

Ravel nodded. "I heard some wholesalers were caught making backroom deals. But they were supposed to have been purged, and distribution should have returned to normal."

*"Regrettably, tears not from the House of Phenex are presently being traded on the black market."*

~~~~~?!!!!!!!!!!!!

We were all taken aback by this revelation! Seriously?! Tears from another point of origin?!

Rias furrowed her brow. "If they're not from the House of Phenex, they must be fake, which would make them completely ineffective... Unless..."

Mephisto Pheles must have read her mind because he nodded in confirmation. *“That’s right, dear Rias. Their tears exert an effect almost equivalent to the real thing. I have one such sample right here.”* A small vial appeared in his hand.

Those were fake Phoenix Tears?

*“I don’t know quite how, but it appears that counterfeit Phoenix Tears are indeed circulating. A handful of stray mages have been caught reaching out to individuals affiliated with the House of Phenex, too. I suspect a connection, and I thought it prudent to warn you, young lady, as you may be a potential target. Do take care.”*

“...” Ravel’s expression darkened slightly at this friendly cautioning.

“I’ll have the Grigori look into it. Don’t worry. Ravel’s got a dashing prince by her side. No problem there. Plus, this whole area is protected by our alliance, and there are plenty of powerful barriers in place. No one will dare try to invade. With your Prince Charming close by, we can relax.” Azazel patted me on the head.

Hold on, was I the prince? I mean, if it came down to it, I’d definitely protect Ravel. Didn’t that go without saying?

But it was what Azazel said next that set my heart racing.

“More importantly, I’ve heard rumors that *someone* is trying to unify the remnants of the old Demon King regime, the Hero Faction, and the Khaos Brigade’s stray mages. Word is that whoever they are, they’re practically running the whole show now, but we’re still short on details... I’ve got a bad feeling about it all. With firepower like that, they’re clearly up to something. Their forces are few, but that doesn’t seem to be stopping them much.”

*Cut it out, Teach... Your premonitions have a habit of coming true!*

Who would want to bring those defeated organizations together? Did it have anything to do with Ophis’s stolen powers? Ah, we were going to get caught up yet another incident, weren’t we? I just wanted a break.

*“I do apologize for the digression,”* Mephisto Pheles said, his tone brightening. *“With all that being said, do take a look at our mages. I hope you can reach*

*favorable pacts with some of them.”*

And so our conversation with the director of the Council of Mages, Mephisto Pheles, came to an end.

I was concerned about all that stuff involving the House of Phenex, but our main priority was the heaps of mage applications.

This promised to be a long night...

-○○●○-

“Ugh, my head is spinning...”

A few days later, I was flicking through a pile of mage portfolios in an empty room on the top floor of my family home shortly after finishing my demon work for the night.

“I’ve finished deciphering these magic symbols, Issei. Please, take a look.”

Beside me was Ravel, my gifted manager. The two of us were going through the documents laid out on the floor, scanning them one by one for any intriguing prospects.

The others were doing the same thing elsewhere in the house. Asia, Koneko, Xenovia, and Gasper were reading their applicants’ forms, per Rias’s and Akeno’s instructions.

Every now and then, I went downstairs to consult my Two Great Ladies, but I spent most of my time reading and discussing things with Ravel.

Yep, rather than leave everything up to my King, I decided it would be best to choose my mage for myself while taking advice from my manager.

Of course, I would ask Rias’s opinion at the very end of the process, but I wanted to see how far Ravel and I could get by ourselves.

Ravel herself had welcomed this approach with aplomb.

“Leave it to me! I’ll find you a suitable partner, Issei!”

She was incredibly motivated. Even now, she was assiduously reading over each and every application, checking words here and there with a dictionary and reference materials in hand. Her hardworking attitude was addictive, and I found myself following suit.

Ravel had set certain criteria to screen the applicants, primarily whether they might prove beneficial to the House of Gremory or the Red Dragon Emperor. Those who failed to meet the prerequisites were discarded immediately. We were scrutinizing those who remained. Of course, Ravel had also given the ones she'd removed a proper read-over just to be sure. Man, she was way too diligent!

A few among Ravel's discards were beautiful witches, and I thought that was a shame...

"This male mage's research is on the use of rare earths and metals in alchemy. As for this female mage..."

She broke down their backgrounds in a way that even I could understand, along with what benefit I could hope to receive from a pact with any of them. According to Koneko, Ravel had even been working on this during her break time at school. Her effort made me feel a bit guilty.

Also, she'd received more information from her family about the Phoenix Tear situation. Riser was particularly concerned.

"You're a heck of a lot smarter than me, Ravel," I remarked quietly.

"Of course," she answered, sticking out her chest. "I may seem younger than you, but I've been a demon for a lot longer than you have."

"That's true. I remember you were with Riser to learn more about Rating Games."

For a while there, she had been a part of Riser's Familia, so she'd witnessed a lot of matches. Her professional experience was no doubt much more extensive than the Gremory Familia's.

"My brother didn't let me take part in direct combat, but I still got to see the real thing firsthand."

"How does our Familia stack up?" I asked.

Ravel set the documents she was holding on the ground and sat formally on her knees. "If I had to sum it up, I'd say you're a very high-firepower team, so overwhelming that you don't even need direction."



Yeah, I agreed.

“But you also have a great many weaknesses. If you were caught out by someone with a mastery of advanced techniques, you would be easily defeated.”

Right. If we were caught at a disadvantage, we’d crumble instantly. Azazel had pointed that out as well, and sure enough, we’d lost our match against the Sitri Familia for that reason. Cao Cao had given us a hard time, as well.

Ravel wore a skeptical look as she continued, “At the same time, it’s natural for any team to be concerned about facing opponents with superior technical skills. If you ask me, most opponents will worry about facing a group as strong as yours.”

“...”

Now *that* was a fresh opinion.

“Plus,” Ravel added. “Everyone in the Gremory Familia, yourself included, is working to compensate for their shortcomings. To be honest, the current professional Rating Game contestants take too much pride in their natural abilities and tactics, and neglect their training. Most high-class demons value their Familia’s unique characteristics and talents more than putting in the effort to improve themselves. If they feel like their team isn’t strong enough, they’ll try to resolve that by trading members. Of course, they do take pride in their chosen Familia members, but it’s equally true that trades are a common occurrence.”

*Hmm.* So most professional Rating Game players traded Familia members when they were lacking in some respect. No wonder the concept of training wasn’t deeply rooted in the game. Kings simply got rid of pieces that failed to live up to expectations. What a cold way of operating. It was completely devoid of affection for their teammates.

I was lucky that someone from the famously affectionate House of Gremory had recruited me. Demons were calculating beings at heart. Come to think of it, that bastard Diodora had proposed a trade.

I listened to Ravel’s thoughtful explanation with piqued interest.

“You and the rest of the Gremory Familia working to improve sets you all apart. The same goes for the Sitri and Bael Familias. It’s unprecedented in demon history, and the results speak for themselves.”

Right. The Sitri and Bael Familias had taken out a sizable number of terrorists. Sirzechs might have been reluctant to send younger demons into battle, but even he couldn’t ignore just how helpful we all were when it came to guarding the underworld.

“In my opinion, so long as you all advance yourselves and improve your overall team balance, that should be more effective than trying to rely on clever tactics.” Ravel’s eyes lit up. “If you’re worried about failing to reach your full potential due to a lack of strategy, then you should focus on increasing your raw strength. You don’t want to lose the advantage you already have because you decided to chase after something else. It’s perfectly fine to concentrate on brute force. If you train enough to break through your weaknesses, that should be sufficient to compensate for your vulnerabilities.”

“...”

There was no doubt about it. Ravel had a very different way of looking at the problem than Rias or Azazel. But she was right. It was worth considering. It might even be a better way for us to grow.

She was a remarkably deep thinker for someone so small and young. A *very* impressive underclasswoman.

“...” I was left stunned by Ravel’s insightful analysis.

Meanwhile, she realized that she’d been talking for a while and rapidly grew flustered. “I-I’m sorry. I went a little too far...”

“N-not at all. I’m impressed. You’re really amazing, Ravel. You’ve put a lot more thought into this than the likes of me or Xenovia. You’d make a great tactician.”

She was definitely the polar opposite of me and Xenovia. Both of us were brawn over brains!

Ravel’s cheeks flushed at the compliment. “T-tactician might be a little much, but I *am* studying every day. There are so many variables to account for!”

She was absolutely right. I still had a ton to learn...

“I have to try harder, too,” I said. “I wish I knew how to thank you for all your hard work.” I meant that from the bottom of my heart. Knowing I didn’t have anything to give my manager stung.

Ravel turned an even deeper shade of red. “U-um... Y-you could give me a pat on the head...”

Now *that* came out of the blue.

“A-are you sure? Just a pat? You don’t want anything else? I’m seriously in your debt here...”

Ravel shook her head emphatically. “It’s an honor just being your manager, Issei. A pat on the head will be more than enough encouragement.”

“...”

*Sirzechs! This girl is too good for me! Thank you so much for assigning her to be my manager!*

Holding back the urge to wrap her in a hug, I gently patted her on the top of the head.

“Heh-heh-heh.” She smiled widely.

Yep, my manager and I would go far together.

A moment later, Ravel seemed to remember something and pulled a planner notebook from her pocket.

“Oh, right. Going forward, we’ll have to adjust the program for your *Breast Dragon* work. We’ve been approached by people from all over the underworld asking for you to attend charity events for children traumatized by the anti-monster attack... There’s actually over a dozen requests...”

Ravel was too good at her job! Would I ever get a moment’s rest again?!

## Maverick Mage

“You seen the council’s rankings? When that old geezer Mephisto announced the scores for this season’s demon youths, it caused a damn uproar. That’s what I heard, anyway.”

“Ah, yeah. Everyone’s saying the newcomers are the best anyone’s seen in decades.”

“Yeah. They’re in a league of their own. Two sisters of Demon Kings, the heir to the title of Great Prince, the King of Lions, the next Archduke, the daughter of the Grigori’s vice-governor, the Red Dragon Emperor, the Holy Demon Sword kid, the Durendal swordswoman, and the host of the Dragon King Vritra. Those titles alone are scary. And the other contenders in their ranks are just as nasty.”

“No wonder those damn mages are climbin’ all over themselves tryin’ to submit their own pacts.”

“Right, the Khaos Brigade’s mages did mention something like that. Speaking of, their leaders were defeated, right? And all the members were scattered, I think... You sure you still want to go through with this?”

“Definitely. The Khaos Brigade put in a special request with us, and from what I hear, their mages are still good to go. Besides, sticking it just to the House of Phenex wouldn’t be any fun.”

“Those mages are supposed to be crazy strong. Shien wants to know what we think of ’em.”

## Life.2

### Rulers of the Night

Using your head was all well and good, but the harsh reality was that being a member of the Gremory Familia meant that you had to train your entire body.

After going through all that mage paperwork and seeing to our nightly demon business, the members of the Gremory Familia (plus Irina) changed into our training outfits and got to practicing in the mock battlefield beneath the Gremory territory.

We'd divided ourselves into two groups. I was training alongside the other warrior-type fighters—Kiba, Xenovia, and Irina.

I'd just finished my first mock battle of the day against Kiba. With his many Demon Swords, including the legendary Gram and his dragon-slaying Holy Demon Swords, that pretty boy was a dangerous opponent. I would've liked to practice with my crimson armor. My regular Balance Breaker Scale Mail left me too vulnerable against Kiba.

Ddraig had been sleeping more and more ever since the battle against Cao Cao. Some days, he didn't respond to me at all. Because of that, I was presently unable to use my Triaina or my True Queen promotions.

"He must have burned himself out reviving you," Azazel had explained. "Your new body is made from Ophis's powers combined with the Great Red's own flesh. Putting that together couldn't have been easy. His soul is still in one piece, and sure, he's still got his full power, but I'll bet he's exhausted. He'll probably need a whole lot of sleep, so you'd better let him get some rest."

My Heavenly Dragon partner had worn himself out for my sake. He was just a soul without any physical form of his own, yet he went to such extremes to help me... I couldn't thank him enough. If he needed sleep to get back to normal, then I'd give him all the time in the world.

*Just make sure you wake up if any super-powered enemies show up, all right? I might need to use those Triaina and True Queen abilities.* It seemed like each new foe we went up against was stronger than the last, which left me worried we wouldn't be up to the next challenge.

I moved to the sidelines after the first mock battle and gulped down my sports drink.

Kiba approached, holding Gram. He stared at the weapon and sighed. "It's just like I thought. This thing is pretty tough to use."

"It's too high-level even for you?" I asked.

Kiba narrowed his eyes at the sword. "The technical aspect of its power is the issue. It burns through my stamina so quickly. Simply lifting it takes a toll on my strength, demonic energy, and more. Using it throughout an entire fight would probably kill me. It certainly lives up to its name as the Demonic Emperor Sword."

It was that bad? Kiba would need to find a new approach to draw on Gram's potential effectively.

Still, the sense of pressure that dragon-slaying blade exerted was no joke! Every time I went up against it, I got shivers. Kiba didn't even need to swing it around. The mere sight of it was enough to get me covered in cold sweat.

Gram's dragon-slaying aura was deadly poison to a guy like me. I literally felt its animosity for dragons. That desire to kill didn't come from Kiba. The sword was so hate-filled it made my skin crawl.

Azazel had advised Kiba to keep Gram stored in a dimensional fold when not using it, as its mere presence was enough to affect me.

Kiba distorted the space around his right hand and tucked Gram away, much the same way as Xenovia stores Durendal. In fact, Kiba was apparently keeping each of the Demon Sword swords he had taken from Siegfried in similar spaces.

"How on earth did that damn Siegfried manage to pull it off?" I wondered aloud.

Kiba shook his head. "I don't think he *could* wield it, not to its full extent. And

not just because of his dragon-based Sacred Gear. Gram requires will, determination. I don't usually fight like Xenovia, but if I ever pull it out in battle, I'll have to try to finish the contest in a single shot."

"What about the other Demon Swords?"

"They're good, though they're all cursed, in their own way. There are risks involved using them, too. Each one either curses the wielder or gradually chips away at something of value... I suspect Siegfried never intended to live a long life. Or maybe he never had that luxury, growing up in that warrior training institute he hailed from."

A Demon Sword that wore away at its wielder's life force? That lunatic, Freed, had also come from the same training facility. Did his time there leave him permanently broken? Well, it was too late to ask that sort of question now.

Kiba took a mouthful of his own energy drink before continuing. "Either way, it makes more sense to summon up some Dragon Knights and have them wield it than to carry it myself."

Now that he mentioned it, I had seen him trying that strategy in a mock fight with Xenovia.

"...I couldn't even touch him," Xenovia chimed in, crouching low and holding her knees in exhaustion. "His Dragon Knights just kept on getting in my way with those Demon Swords. Heh. I should have seen this coming. All my power means nothing when you can keep me at a distance like that..."

Xenovia, hoping to master a more technique-driven approach to combat, was currently being subjected to Kiba's severe training regimen. He forced her to draw on the individual power of her various Excaliburs rather than rely on the sheer strength of her Durendal Cannon.

The more she tried to incorporate various strategies into her fighting style, the more she realized just how huge the gulf between her and Kiba was.

"If you unlocked your power, you wouldn't have any difficulty destroying my Dragon Knights, even if they're equipped with Demon Swords. And if you landed an attack on me, the battle would be over then and there," Kiba continued. "It's a waste to ignore the Excaliburs' unique abilities. Master them,



and your swordsmanship will be far greater than mine.”

The seven Excaliburs possessed phenomenal abilities. Thus far, Xenovia had only been able to properly draw on Excalibur Destruction, though she was gaining proficiency with Excalibur Mimic’s ability to freely transform and Excalibur Transparent’s powers of invisibility. Then again, even Freed had been able to pull that off...

Xenovia *was* improving...but she still had a long way to go to match Kiba. She could also try enhancing her existing strengths to better compensate for her weaknesses, as Ravel had suggested, but I had to agree with Kiba here. Mastering more of the Excaliburs would definitely give her a leg up. Xenovia seemed to feel the same way herself, which was why she kept challenging Kiba to these training sessions—and Kiba was more than happy to oblige.

“Finally, she’s interested in real technique-based combat!”

Kiba had been overcome with emotion back when Xenovia first turned to him for help. He must have been genuinely worried for her.

Irina, having accompanied us all here, had borrowed Ex-Durendal from Xenovia, wielding it with flair. In her hands, the blade undulated and transformed, taking the shape of a long katana.

“See, this is how you use the Mimic. You just need a little imagination. Once you master it, you can make it do all sorts of things.”

I should’ve expected as much from Excalibur Mimic’s former wielder. Irina still had a greater mastery of the weapon’s transformation techniques. Honestly, Rossweisse had used it to great effect, too, back during the fight with Sairaorg Bael.

Excalibur had been divided into seven distinct blades, each with its own unique abilities. Those seven swords were later merged with Durendal, but their powers remained just as potent.

First was Excalibur Destruction. True to its name, it possessed tremendous offensive power. Xenovia had wielded this one before her reincarnation as a demon, and it remained her favored weapon. Given her relentless pursuit of raw strength, it was a perfect match for her.

Next was Excalibur Mimic, Irina's former weapon. That one had the power to morph into any desired shape. Irina had often given it a ropelike form, but in combat, she liked to use it as a katana. From what I heard, it could take on a great many forms depending on the user's will.

Third was Excalibur Rapid, the one that bastard, Freed, had used. It increased a person's speed, even the quickness of their strikes.

Then came Excalibur Transparent. Not only could the weapon become invisible, it rendered its user transparent, too.

Excalibur Nightmare's abilities were all about illusion and dreams. Apparently, it tended to have a high compatibility with those who specialized in magic. Xenovia, who didn't have much talent in that department, was still struggling to master it. If she could get a hold on it one day, it would let her deceive opponents with illusions and control their dreams. No doubt it would have a great many uses...

Excalibur Blessing was primarily used in sacred Christian rituals. For instance, weakening demons or vampires during exorcisms, boosting an exorcist's power, or bestowing good fortune on those participating in a mass. Among the seven blades, its powers occupied a unique category. It did, however, require a certain talent to wield effectively, and Xenovia wasn't quite there yet.

Finally, there was Excalibur Ruler, which formerly belonged to Arthur from Team Vali. People said it had the ability to manipulate other beings at will...

"I doubt I'll be able to command legendary monsters as Arthur did... I can't even activate it properly." As Xenovia said, she was presently struggling to master this last blade.

Rias had similarly predicted that Excalibur Ruler would be the most challenging to master. The other six would have to come first.

With Irina's support, Xenovia would hopefully come to understand Excalibur Mimic's abilities, at the very least.

Incidentally, Irina had also started training with us. She was trying to establish her own fighting style and was consulting Kiba on how best to use the new Holy Demon Swords heaven was busy mass-producing. She was, of course, an angel,

but if one were to classify her in demon terms, she was more of a technique-focused magic user. Speaking of which, she was learning magic from Rossweisse as well.

“Keep this up and soon you’ll be a self-proclaimed swordswoman, Xenovia,” Irina joked.

Xenovia was left visibly stunned by this joke, her mouth hanging open in shock. “Damn you, you mean self-proclaimed angel!” she shot back, teary-eyed.

That title bordered on taboo for Irina, who immediately puffed her cheeks out in anger. “I *am* an angel! Right, Issei? We’re childhood friends. You know I’m a *real* angel, don’t you?”

She was dragging *me* into this...?! No thank you! Whenever these two started bickering over the smallest things, it rapidly escalated into a war of words!

Hold on. Irina and I *were* childhood friends. I’d almost forgotten.

“Come to think of it, we used to hang out a lot. It kind of slips my mind, sometimes,” I admitted.

Xenovia broke into a grin at this response. “Ah, I see. So you’re really just a *self-proclaimed* childhood friend. It all makes sense now.”

Uh-oh! Xenovia had latched onto that phrase to tease Irina! I’d slipped up there!

Irina’s puffed out cheeks turned red; a flood of tears gathered at the edges of her eyes. “I *am* an angel! We *are* childhood friends! You’re awful!”

“Hey there, self-proclaimed childhood friend!”

“Look who’s talking, you self-proclaimed swordswoman! Muscles-for-brains!”

These two... Why did I find their dumb quarreling kind of cute?

Can you believe it? When I first met this duo, they were Church-affiliated warriors who’d carried themselves with incredible menace.

Xenovia, with her cool and collected aura, had strutted about as if she would cut you down at a moment’s notice. Irina, on the other hand, had been a cheerful but uncompromising messenger of heaven in matters of work and

faith.

Now, one was a power-obsessed idiot, while the other was a self-proclaimed angel. Seriously, there was no predicting how much people could change. Then again, maybe this was how girls were supposed to act at their age? Maybe the fact that they were letting their true selves show was proof they had opened up to me?

And so, our group's warriors—me, Kiba, Xenovia, and Irina—continued with our training.

A short distance away, our more magic-focused members—Rias, Akeno, and Asia—were practicing their own techniques.

"I still think there's no alternative to real-life combat experience. I wonder when we're going to get to hunt another stray demon?" Xenovia grumbled.

Yes, ever since all that trouble with the Hero Faction, there had been quite a few cases of former humans awakening their Sacred Gears and becoming strays, abandoning their high-class masters who'd made them demons in unfair bargains.

And it was all because Cao Cao's group had leaked information on unlocking Balance Breaker techniques. As a result, the House of Agares had been deploying us to capture or subdue strays semi-regularly.

Sometimes, we were able to talk reason into runaways who'd fled the torment of cruel masters... But on a few occasions, the stray was drunk on their power, forcing us to subdue them forcefully.

Occasionally, they would be using an especially potent Balance Breaker, making our job incredibly dangerous. If we weren't careful around clever technique-style opponents, one mistake on our part could lead to serious injury.

Whenever such individuals fled to Japan, here in the human world, it was our responsibility to hunt them down. From what I heard, Sairaorg had been given much the same task over in the underworld.

Keeping peace was surprisingly tough. The towns and villages devastated in the underworld were beginning to rebuild, but true peace remained a distant

goalpost.

But if we were to have any hope of preventing a repeat of those recent tragedies, we had to train.

“Why don’t we wrap it up here and see what everyone else is doing?” I suggested.

Kiba responded with a nod, followed by Xenovia and Irina.

Together, we made our way over to Rias and the others.

While crossing the mock battlefield, I sank into contemplation.

I’d learned a great deal since becoming a mid-level demon. For instance, I paid more attention to the individual circumstances of each family within the Seventy-Two Pillars. I considered each demon’s clan’s special characteristics, the nature of its territory, and more. Basically, I focused on the details much more than I used to.

Why? Well, because my dream of one day being promoted to high-class level was within reach. I mean, it was still impossibly distant, and it would be dangerous getting there, but it wasn’t *unattainable*.

I’d also taken to boning up on Rating Games.

After several bouts, there were still a lot of basic principles I didn’t grasp. All the match types, for instance.

“I thought the rules for each were announced on the day,” I mused as we walked across the field.

“That’s actually quite rare,” Kiba answered. “Usually, teams receive the rules in advance. After all, it’s difficult coming up with advanced tactics otherwise. For our matches, maybe the organizers wanted to see what we young demons could do when put on the spot? If you ask me, it was only really the Sitri Familia who excelled in that regard.”

“I guess we’re the brawn-over-brains team, best suited to quickly taking action in the heat of the moment,” Xenovia said while munching on a rice ball.

*She* was the one who most embodied that metaphor, though? Not that I was in any position to speak...

“But why do we always get thrown right into the deep end?” I asked Kiba.

“That was decided from the top. The young demon Familias, ours especially, all received their instructions at the last minute. Apparently, in Sairaorg Bael’s match against Glasya-Labolas and the Sitri Familia’s one against Agares, the rules were given to them a day or so before the event.”

*I didn’t know that! So Sairaorg and Saji both had time to prepare before their matches?!*

“Why were we the only ones put through all that?! It’s not fair!”

“It just so happened that we were told the rules immediately before our Rating Game against the Sitri Familia, but I’ve heard a rumor that the higher-ups decided to keep it that way intentionally from that point on.”

“Huh? What gives? Are they out to get us?”

“The theory is they want to intentionally create irregular situations in the hope of encouraging us and our opponents to grow in new, unprecedented ways... Indeed, that’s what happened.”

“...”

Kiba was right. We did grow as a result of that game, or maybe in the midst of it.

Whether it was me awakening newfound powers, or the catalyst for change and evolution in Saji, or Sairaorg’s growth... Come to think of it, every last member of the Gremory, Sitri, and Bael Familias had improved in some way.

“You think having to act on the spur of the moment was the trigger?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Kiba answered with a frown. “Or maybe it was just coincidence. Looking back though, we did learn quite a bit from the experience.”

That was true. However, it kind of felt like we were being manipulated. I mean, sure, we were young and inexperienced, and we didn’t really have any right to protest. Still, it just didn’t feel right. We put our dreams on the line in those matches.

But who could have been behind it? I couldn’t imagine Sirzechs doing something like that.

...

Suddenly, it struck me.

*Ajuka Beelzebub.*

He was the one behind the basic theory of the Rating Game, and his faction held many studies specialized in various technical aspects. Maybe...

While I pondered that question, we arrived at the area where our magic-wielding members were busy training.

This mock battlefield was enormous. No matter how far you walked, the only thing ahead of you was more empty space. And high above, there was nothing but shining lights. Just how many Tokyo Domes could you fit in this underground cavern?

Rossweisse and Le Fay were talking to each other atop a glowing magic square, while Koneko and Gasper were sitting cross-legged in concentration. Koneko was quietly working on kneading her fighting spirit, while Kuroka supervised over her shoulder.

Le Fay and Kuroka, it seemed, were helping out with everyone's training.

Off in the distance swirled a violent storm of lightning and crimson magic. Akeno and Rias were probably busy further developing their own techniques.

Asia, I found, was engrossed in conversation with Ophis and Rassei.

Ravel was the only one absent. She'd decided to remain at my family home to continue sorting through the application documents for mages wanting to enter into a pact with me.

"Go and see to your training, Issei. I'll keep on working on this end."

Like that, she had sent me away. I appreciated all her efforts, but that didn't stop me from feeling slightly guilty about it all. I was just so useless. I owed her for all her help.

Seeing us approach, Asia rushed over. "Issei! Everyone! Did you finish your practice?"

"Yeah. We figured that was probably enough for one day," I answered. "What



are you up to?”

Ophis made her way across to us, Rassei perched on her head. “I have been teaching Asia how to communicate with dragons.”

*How to communicate with dragons?*

My confusion must have been obvious, as Asia launched into an explanation. “Azazel told me once that I have a natural affinity for summoning magic and making contracts with monsters, so I asked Ophis to instruct me on speaking with dragons.”

Irina reached out to stroke Rassei’s back, the small dragon still sitting on Ophis’s head. “There are lots of ways to make monsters obey you,” she said. “You can recruit them as familiars, which basically makes them your servant, or you can try getting them to name their price and doing a little give-or-take.”

Ah. I’d heard about the kind of pacts needed to recruit monsters as your familiar.

Basically, the degree of difficulty varied depending on the demon’s level of skill and whether the creatures in question took a liking to them.

To sum it up, those who knew their way around monsters and were well-liked by them had a much easier time convincing them to form pacts.

However, the more powerful the creature, the more it expected from its master in exchange.

Other factors played into it as well. It was all about compatibility. I had entered into a master–servant contract with my Skidbladnir just the other day, recruiting the miniature living ship as my own familiar. I hadn’t needed to set any particular price to get its agreement.

While familiars might not be particularly useful in combat situations. If used appropriately, they could turn Rating Game matches on their heads.

“Oh, yes,” Asia began. “I was reading more about the Rating Game when I saw something surprising. About familiars.”

I could see where she was going with this.

“You mean making a pact with a strong familiar and relying on it in matches?”

I asked. “It seems it isn’t that simple. There are restrictions on what you can and can’t do, especially when it comes to overpowered monsters.”

Kiba nodded along in agreement. “If there were no limits, both sides just keep on summoning monsters to fight for them. The aim of the Rating Game is for high-class demons to wield their Familias in battle. Drawing on monsters instead would defeat the purpose.”

He was right, of course. Without limits, everyone would summon monsters from a safe position and command without entering battle themselves.

“That’s why, in essence, players are only allowed to use familiars to assist during the course of the game,” Kiba continued. “Of course, there’s more to it than that. Depending on the rules, there may be times when you’re allowed to draw on a powerful familiar. Those opportunities are few and far between, however. A surer way to make use of a monster in the Rating Game is to simply recruit it into your Familia. Going down that path also allows you to augment their abilities through the Evil Pieces system. The demand for monsters has increased significantly since the creation of the Rating Game and the invention of Evil Pieces, and familiar trainers have risen in prominence, too.”

I could see why demons might decide to recruit monsters into their Familia directly rather than making loose familiar pacts. Building on their abilities and keeping them as servants was better than merely using them.

Then again, there were no doubt others who considered it easier and more economical to simply keep them as traditional familiars.

If you had a rare and powerful monster, maybe recruiting it into your Familia would be the best way to secure its lifelong allegiance? In a give-and-take relationship, the contract could be terminated if it was deemed unbeneficial for the monster. In the end, the best path probably depended on your personal philosophy. Apparently, there were also cases where monsters themselves approached demons asking to join their Familias to enhance their natural abilities.

If I ever had the chance to recruit a monster like that, I wouldn’t know which approach to take...

Anyway, Asia was pursuing her own path, hoping to make simple pacts with

lots of monsters in an effort to improve her summoning powers.

“Summoning magic,” Xenovia began. “It takes a world of talent, more than other forms of magic or combat techniques. There aren’t a whole lot of exceptional practitioners out there. And yet...”

“Right,” I interjected. “Azazel says she’s got a natural gift for it.”

I let my gaze wander to Rassei and Ophis. Sprite dragons were said to be especially difficult to bond with, yet Asia had successfully recruited one as her familiar. A small one, but still.

Well, from her perspective, it was probably more like a friendship-based contract, not a transactional give-and-take one. That had come as a surprise even to our guide, the Familiar Master Azh.

“I’ve asked Rossweisse about learning summoning magic, but I haven’t had much luck yet...” Asia stared at her feet apologetically.

“No, not at all,” I responded. “You’re just getting started... Hold on, Rossweisse knows summoning magic?”

No sooner did I utter those words than Rossweisse strolled our way, having seemingly finished her discussion with Le Fay.

“I’m not very good at it, but I know enough to teach the general theory,” she explained.

Ah, so that was it. I should have expected as much of our exceptional Norse magic user! *With Rossweisse and Ophis by her side, Asia should have no trouble at all learning the ropes...*

I let my gaze wander for a moment and noticed Kuroka—watching over Koneko and Gasper, both sitting in a meditation pose—beckoning to me.

*Beckoning to me?* I pointed to myself to make sure, and she nodded in confirmation.

“I’ll be back in a second,” I said to the others, before going to see what she wanted.

“What is it?” I asked while stepping into their meditation zone.

“Heh-heh.” Kuroka gave a broad grin. “I’ve just had Shirone and Gaspy empty their minds, *meow*.”

The purpose of the exercise was to draw out latent powers within themselves, like when I’d delved into my Sacred Gear. From what I could tell, they hadn’t had much in the way of results yet, though...

Koneko was hoping to clear her mind to become one with nature, which was the foundational principle for sage arts.

Hold on. Since when did this sinister cat woman take to calling Gasper “Gaspy”? That was *my* nickname for him.

“Give me a hand, Red Dragon Emperor,” Kuroka ordered.

I had no problem with it, but what exactly did she want me to do?

While I puzzled over that, she took my hand and...

*Plop!*

...she buried it through the gap in her kimono, straight into her cleavage!

My head was overcome with joy at this superb sensation, at the wondrous softness, the divine texture, the sheer voluptuousness!

It was so elastic, so tender, so smooth. A perfect amalgamation of Rias’s and Akeno’s best parts! *Wh-what a blessing!* With this, I had finally felt the tenderness of a mature woman firsthand!

Koneko’s eyes snapped open, and her face clouded over with anger. Had she sensed what was happening?

“K-Kuroka! Get away from Issei! If he learns what yours feel like before mine grow big enough...!”

Immediately, the big sister cat smacked her younger sibling over the head.

“Yep, you failed, *meow*. You still have a long way to go, Shirone. You let yourself get thrown off by something this insignificant. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes...”

Kuroka’s stern warning left Koneko speechless. Although she was clearly frustrated, Koneko shook her head to regain her composure and returned to

meditation.

Gaspar, on the other hand, remained perfectly still throughout. He never failed to surprise in the most unexpected of ways.

Ultimately, he seemed to come out ahead of Koneko in today's mental exercises.

Enough about that, though. The touch of Kuroka's breasts... Wonderful!

Half an hour later, everyone had concluded their practicing, so we all gathered together.

The only exceptions were Rias and Akeno, still drilling themselves on magic and demonic powers in the distance.

Fortunately, it didn't take them long to join up with the rest of us.

"Sorry, we got caught up in the moment."

"Oh-ho-ho. The president was quite a bit more intense than usual."

They must have gone all out, as their clothes were torn here and there, revealing their bare skin.

Yep, the undersides of their boobs were simply unbeatable!

When I spotted the object that two had brought with them, I gasped.

A huge sphere floated over Rias's head. Within it swirled a violent mass of crimson and jet-black power.

Even I recognized it instantly—an unimaginable quantity of compressed demonic energy.

"Is that what's been emitting such an intimidating presence all this time?" I asked, pointing to the sphere.

"It's the president's secret move... Surely, there's no need to explain what it does, right?" Akeno interjected.

"Nope," Xenovia answered, sweat all but trickling down her cheeks. "It looks super dangerous. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that."

Yep. I knew a concentrated mass of raw destruction when I saw it. Rias was

working on enhancing her abilities.

No. Knowing her, there had to be more to it. If she was simply going to unleash it in a super-powered blast, it would be easily evaded. This was more than just brute power.

“...There’s no way this move will be permissible in the Rating Game,” Rias said. “I’ve been too naive. All this time, I’ve been focusing on techniques for use in matches... But after those terrorist attacks... After losing Issei... Well, it got me thinking. *Real* battle calls for the power to completely annihilate your enemies.”

“So it’s...” I began.

“...A move so strong that not even the Rating Game’s retirement mechanisms can save the target,” Kiba finished.

Looks of abject horror fell over everyone’s faces.

Rias was a Wizard-type fighter, though her techniques leaned toward those of a Power-type. Her brother Sirzechs similarly focused on Wizard-type strategies, but he prioritized technique over raw strength. While the two were siblings, there were noticeable differences in the qualities of their destructive powers. Unfortunately, Rias didn’t quite have Sirzechs’ gift for different abilities. However, her pure strength was a different story.

This new move of hers had to be fiendishly potent. The sense of menace emanating from that sphere spoke volumes.

Rias and Akeno grinned to themselves as they changed into fresh jackets.

“Let’s go home, everyone,” Rias said, bringing an end to our training session.

We all needed to get stronger.

No matter what happened, we had to survive—together.

-○○●○-

“Ah, this is the life...”

Back home, I enjoyed a relaxing bath, then relaxed on one of the living room sofas to enjoy a refreshing popsicle.

It was wonderful, true medicine for the soul.

“Do you want to try the chocolate mint one?” Koneko asked from my lap, offering me a spoonful of her own ice cream.

“Sure. One bite,” I said, opening my mouth with a loud “*Aaahhh*.”

This was awesome! Sharing a taste with my cute underclasswoman!

It was like an indirect kiss. Koneko never would’ve done this before opening her heart to me. She did it so naturally now!

While I was busy relishing this newfound joy, Ravel appeared.

“K-Koneko... This has been bothering me for a while. It isn’t proper etiquette to sit on Issei’s lap when there are other people around!”

Uh-oh, it looked like Koneko was in for a scolding. And yet she didn’t budge one inch.

“...This is my special seat. Just for me.”

“S-special seat?! Issei! Tell her to get off!”

“R-really, Ravel, it isn’t any trouble. Koneko doesn’t weigh much.”

It was true, she was remarkably light, owing to her petite size. Besides, I’d grown used to her sitting on my lap. It had practically become an essential part of my daily routine.

Koneko shifted slightly, leaning into me.

“I’m going to marry Issei one day, so this is my special place.”

“...!”

Ravel screwed up her face in frustration. Despite how she acted publicly, Ravel had asked to sit on my lap several times while we were alone, and I let her, of course. Koneko, having walked in on us on one such occasion, was definitely trying to show off.

Recently, Koneko had made a habit of monopolizing this position, as if to claim that it was hers alone... Cat *yukai* were said to be highly territorial, so maybe this was an expression of her claiming her domain.

“Th-that isn’t fair!” Ravel protested, her eyes growing damp. “No fair! No fair! No fair!”



“...”

My competent manager...was throwing a childish tantrum!

“You’re so mean, Koneko! Take this!” Ravel pushed her out of her way. “I’m going to sit here! I’m staking my claim!”

No sooner was my lap free than Ravel plopped herself down on it!

Shoved aside, Koneko’s eyes widened, and her lips pursed in obvious displeasure.

“...Argh!”

“Eeep!”

The next moment, she shoved Ravel and retook her position!

“This is mine! I won’t give it up!” Koneko clung stubbornly to me, unwilling to back down.

“You can’t keep him to yourself! I want to sit there, too!” Ravel cried furiously, pushing as hard as she could.

Why did I feel like the silhouettes of an incensed cat and phoenix were hovering in the background, glaring at each other?

Riser had mentioned something like this might happen the last time I spoke to him.

*“Listen, about Ravel... She’s well-mannered and polite with those she cares about...but she’s just as selfish and spoiled as Rias. She has a habit of going after other people’s things. Understand that you’re going to have to deal with that eventually if you plan on having her live with you.”*

Yep, he’d warned me of this.

But bad habit or not, friends shouldn’t fight!

Thankfully, I found a way to calm them down. The solution...

“...”

“...”

...was to have Koneko perch on my left knee, with Ravel on my right. The two

did their utmost to avoid looking at each other.

W-well, the soft touch of their rear ends resting on my knees was a delight for the senses... My lap wasn't a battlefield, so I hoped they would keep the peace.

Strangely enough, I saw them interacting with each other perfectly normally the next morning.

They liked to bicker, but deep down, they were true friends.

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Nights like that weren't at all uncommon. During lunch the next day, however, I decided to drop into the student council room at school.

There were only the two of us there—me and Saji. Rather than our usual routine, we were playing a board game.

“You’ve still got a long way to go, Hyoudou!”

*Saji beat me! My fifth consecutive loss!*

“Dammit! I’ll figure out a way to beat you, just you wait! Then we’ll see who’s the real winner!” I said.

The board game we were playing was modeled after the Rating Game variant, Scramble Flags.

To put it in simple terms, both teams had several flags positioned around a large field, and we took turns moving our pieces in an effort to nab as many of the other side’s as we could.

The objective was to capture all of them within a designated time limit, or to be the one holding on to the most when the timer reached zero. You could also reclaim flags captured by the other team, though only if you came out on top after a roll of the dice. The numbers each player rolled decided the result of any such skirmishes.

In the actual Rating Game, dice might or might not be present depending on the predetermined rules.

However, for the board game, a player had to decide where to attack and defend while keeping an eye on the greater field.

Per the original version’s rules, so long as a player didn’t lose more than half

their flags, they were safe. There were various ways to keep them from falling into enemy hands; from hiding them in the field, to luring the enemy team into traps with decoys, and even sacrificing one flag to regroup and protect the others.

I saw why the more strategy-minded Sitri and Agares Familias were suited to this style of Rating Game...

While staring down at the board, I thought hard about my next move.

"You know..." Saji said in a solemn, muted voice.

"Why do you look so gloomy all of a sudden?" I demanded.

Seriously, it was like a pall had fallen over him! His eyes were devoid of life!

"Look, I heard you're dating Rias!" he stated.

"...!"

Wh-where did he hear that?! I certainly hadn't mentioned it to him!

Saji sighed deeply. "Remember right before you went off to fight that last boss during the anti-monster crisis? Cao Cao, I think his name was. You kissed Rias. Like a lover. I was floored, so I asked the chairwoman about it..."

*"Yes. They've been dating since the Academy Festival... Didn't you know, Saji?"*

Apparently, that's how Chairwoman Sona had replied.

Saji took me by the shoulder, pulled me close, and shook me.

"I had no idea! Damn you, Hyoudoooouuu! I thought we were pals! Why didn't tell me?! Does Kiba know?!"

"Uh, well, er... I guess I just couldn't find the right moment."

"Did you try?! I mean, you could have brought it up practically any time! Like when you asked me for help with Ddraig!"

He was talking about the time right before the mid-level demon promotion exam.

"Oh. S-sorry." I looked away, raising a hand to scratch my cheek.

How did he expect me to raise that subject?! Saji and I were in love with our

masters! What kind of friend went around boasting about having won his woman's heart first?!

Saji hadn't even had any intimate physical contact with his beloved chairwoman...

"...So. How was it? Having your master fall in love with you, I mean." Jealousy colored his features.

"It's the most wonderful thing I've ever known," I responded, giving a thumbs-up and looking as cheerful as I could.

Yep, seriously. I'd never had it better.

Sleeping next to the girl I loved, sharing lunch with her, opening our hearts to each other—I was so happy I could've cried tears of joy! This was a level of elation that went far, far beyond even the most extraordinary stage of happiness!

"Dammit!" Saji wailed, clutching his head in his hands. "I'll curse you with Vritra's powers! The most progress I've made is going to the movies with the chairwoman! And all the other Familia members went with us! When did I fall so far behind?! What makes a Heavenly Dragon so different to a Dragon King?!"

I...didn't know the answer to that.

*Sorry, Saji. Looks like I've come out light years ahead.*

"What are you shouting about, Saji? We can hear you from the corridor outside. Keep it down in here."

The next moment, the chairwoman and the other student council members returned as a group.

"Ch-Chairwoman." Saji wiped away his tears and sat up straight.

"Oh, Issei," Chairwoman Sona said, her gaze meeting mine with a soft smile. "How are you? Come to pay us a visit, I see?"

"Yes. Sorry for disturbing you all."

"Not at all. There isn't much to see here, but feel free to stay until our student council meeting."

“Thank you.”

Chairwoman Sona seemed to be smiling in my direction a lot recently. Did she feel closer to me because of her friendship with Rias?

I still wasn't entirely comfortable referring to her just as Sona, though...

For all my unease, it was nothing compared to Saji's. He was shaking all over, his expression even more serious than before.

“H-h-hey,” he stammered, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and whispering into my ear. “Wh-what the heck's going on here?! When did you and the chairwoman get on a first-name basis?!”

*Ah, right.* I could see why that might be a huge problem from where he was standing.

“I—I didn't do anything. It just sort of happened...,” I answered quietly.

Saji was practically choking me! *Seriously, buddy, your grip is tight!*

“What do you mean?! Sh-she's never even referred to me by my first name...!” he demanded tearfully.

Meanwhile, the Bishop Hanakai gave me a thumbs-up. “Good job, Hyoudou. You've got to learn when to call it quits, Gen.”

Had she overheard us?!

The first-year Pawn Nimura nodded in agreement. “Please try to win the chairwoman's heart, too, Hyoudou. Genshirou isn't suited to dating older women. You need to be forceful to win the heart of an older girl, Genshirou. Like Hyoudou.”

The two girls chasing after Saji both offered sensible advice.

“Heyyy! Hanakai! Nimura!” I shot back...

Despite their self-serving wisdom, they were both good catches. Saji ought to consider asking them on dates. Not that it was my business!

The next moment, Vice-Chairwoman Shinra drew near. “...The chairwoman wouldn't fall for you that easily,” she said in a low voice. “Don't pay those girls any mind, Hyoudou.”

“Right. Of course.” I answered.

*Hey, Shinra, can't you get Kiba to fall for you or something?! He keeps acting weird around me. I can hardly stand the heat of his gaze! Recently, he's even been cooking me lunch!*

Yep, I had to get serious about defending my chastity! To make matters worse, Gaspy had taken to jumping on my lap whenever Koneko and Ravel weren't around! Plus, Riser was calling me all the time now, and Sairaorg wouldn't stop writing me letters!

Given Kuroka's and Le Fay's presence, I couldn't help but worry whether Vali wasn't also up to something behind the scenes! Seriously, why were so many men flocking to me lately?!

All I wanted was a sexy and erotic life with *girls*! So why did all these dudes want some kind of macho relationship?!

“Issei,” the chairwoman called while my heart screamed out in confusion.

“Y-yes?”

She'd opened a small magic circle for communication in the palm of her hand.

Had something happened?

“I just received a message,” she said. “I'm sure Rias will tell you when you go back, but the vampire meeting has been scheduled for tomorrow.”

...

Between the mage selection and our training, it had completely slipped my mind. But yes, come to think of it, Rias had mentioned that we were waiting for confirmation from the vampire side.

Vampires. In some ways, they were similar to demons, but the differences were significant.

My knowledge of vampires stopped at Gasper, but it seemed I wouldn't have to wait long to meet more.

-○●○-

Late the following day, during the night of our vampire meeting...

We'd all gathered in the club room. "We" being the members of the Occult Research Club, Chairwoman Sona, Vice-Chairwoman Shinra, Azazel representing the fallen angels, and a nun standing in for heaven.

The nun's face was shrouded by her veil, though I could see it well enough to make out beautiful northern European features like those of an actress. She had a kind, gentle aura. If I had to guess, I would've said she was in her late twenties.

Actually, I'd met this woman once before.

The nun looked to everyone before greeting us. "My apologies for the delayed introduction. My name is Griselda Quarta, and I oversee the forces of heaven in this region. I've already had the pleasure of making Red Dragon Emperor's and Sister Asia's acquaintances not too long ago, but this is my first time meeting the rest of you."

"She's my boss!" Irina added.

Azazel reached out to shake Sister Griselda's hand. "Ah, Gabriel's Queen! I've heard of you! Sister Griselda, huh? You're supposed to be one of heaven's top five exorcists, huh?"

"I'm honored to hear that word of me has reached the ears of the former governor of the fallen angels."

Yes, she was Sister Griselda, the one responsible for supervising all of heaven's people in this region.

She was in the direct service of Gabriel, one of the Four Great Seraphs, as her personal Queen; she was Irina's boss; and she knew Xenovia from her home country. Gabriel's suit was hearts, hence Griselda's nickname, the Queen of Hearts!

Griselda was constantly traveling back and forth between heaven and the Vatican, so she didn't stop by the local churches particularly often. For that reason, we had only met her ourselves a short time ago.

Her appearance at the time had been enough to throw Xenovia into a panic. Griselda was from the same Church-affiliated facility and had often looked after Xenovia, making it rough to go against her. That Xenovia, a staunch follower of

the Christian faith, had chosen to become a demon definitely surprised Griselda. However, Xenovia neglecting to contact her for so long likely hurt more.

In short, this was the first time any of us besides Asia, Xenovia, Irina, and me had met Griselda.

“I apologize,” Sister Griselda said with a bow. “I should have visited much sooner... Unfortunately, circumstance prevented me from doing so. I do regret how things turned out.”

She was so polite.

“Oh? You don’t look too good, Xenovia,” Irina remarked, as though hinting at something more.

“Don’t push me, Irina,” Xenovia whispered, doing her best to conceal her stiff expression from the visiting nun.

Griselda reached out to grab her by the cheeks. “Xenovia? You really don’t want to see me?”

“N-no. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“S-sorry I didn’t answer your calls...”

Griselda had been constantly trying to get in touch with Xenovia?

The nun relaxed her grip having accepted the apology. “I understand. We have each other’s numbers, though, so please send me a text sometime, okay? Feel free to join me for a meal, too.”

“Y-you’re just going scold me about little things, though...,” Xenovia grumbled.

“Of course. We live so close to each other. It’s only natural to worry about your welfare.”

Griselda was like a reliable older sister looking out for her younger sibling. It was kind of cute to see Xenovia, usually so brash and fearless, looking like a fish out of water. She didn’t usually show this side of herself.



With greetings out of the way, all that remained was to wait for the vampire guests to arrive.

The night grew dark...

An eerie chill seeped into the room, and all turned silent outside. Everyone sensed it. Our gazes turned as one to the window and the entrance to the old school building.

Rias rose to her feet. "They're here... Vampires bring a cold atmosphere with them." She looked to Kiba, who stood and gave a small bow before leaving the room.

Was he going to welcome the vampires?

My thoughts turned back to what everyone had told me about them ahead of time.

Vampires were unable to enter a building without an explicit invitation. They had no reflection in mirrors, and no shadows, either. It was impossible for them to cross running water, they detested garlic, and they were vulnerable to symbols of the church, like crosses and holy water.

On top of all that, they apparently needed to sleep in their own coffins if they were to get any rest.

Gaspar, who was only half vampire, was somewhat different. He had a shadow and a reflection, was perfectly capable of crossing rivers, and was slowly overcoming his fear of garlic. He didn't need to sleep in a coffin, either. His human heritage won out against his vampiric side, I guess. Maybe that's how he got by sleeping in a cardboard box...

The visiting vampires were pure-blooded, hence why they couldn't step inside without Kiba letting them in.

The rest of us in the Gremory Familia lined up around our King, Rias, in preparation to receive our guests. Shinra likewise took her position behind Chairwoman Sona, while Irina sat behind Sister Griselda. Akeno was waiting with a small cart, ready to serve tea and snacks at a moment's notice. Azazel was the only one who didn't seem tense.

Basically, our leaders were seated, while the rest of us, their servants, were left standing.

As for our resident vampire boy, Gaspy...

“ ... ”

He looked really conflicted, but I could hardly blame him. After all, he had been viciously persecuted and driven out of pure-blooded vampire society.

It seemed our guests today weren't from his family, but all the same, he was still a mess of nerves.

After a short wait, there came a knock at the club room door.

“I've brought our guests,” Kiba said, inviting them in courteously.

A doll-like girl stood behind him in the doorway. She wore an elaborate dress, the sort a medieval princess might have. Her features seemed crafted of fragile porcelain.

Her eyes, nose, even her mouth looked artificial, somehow devoid of any human touch, like those of an old doll, and her long, wavy, golden hair only added to that impression. She had a mysterious, suspicious aura, and her skin was so pale I could've mistaken her for recently deceased.

Unlike Gasper, who was pale largely on account of his shut-in nature, her skin seemed to lack even the faintest touch of vitality.

Her eyes were crimson in hue—much deeper and darker than Gasper's were.

She looked around the same age as us, but could appearances be trusted here? Like demons, vampires were said to be especially long-lived, and were more than capable of changing their appearances as they pleased...

...

My eyes widened when I saw her feet.

There was no shadow.

She was a real vampire. I shouldn't have been surprised. Still, I struggled to hide my shock.

A man and woman, both wearing suits, waited behind the girl. Were they

escorts? Or bodyguards, perhaps?

Going by their pale faces, they were vampires, too. My skin prickled in their cold, thorny presence.

There was one other thing I noticed, I couldn't sense any aura from them, not a trace of vital life energy.

The girl—the leader of the vampire dignitaries—introduced herself. “Greetings, esteemed representatives of the three great powers. I am honored to meet the sisters of two Demon Kings and the former governor of the fallen angels. I am Elmenhilde Karnstein. Please call me Elme.”

What a grandiose name. It certainly had a noble ring to it. At Rias's urging, Elmenhilde took the seat directly across from her.

“Karnstein,” Azazel repeated, resting a hand under his chin. “As I recall, that's the surname of one of the two major vampire factions, and one of the highest-ranking houses in the Carmilla bloc. It's been a long time since I last saw a pure-blooded, high-ranking vampire in the flesh...”

*The Carmilla bloc...*

I recognized that name, too. I'd asked Rias and Azazel to give me a quick rundown on vampire society ahead of time.

Vampires had been denizens of the dark since ancient times. Their society was sorted in a class system, much like demon civilization. The two peoples even shared some weaknesses. However, whereas demons resided in the underworld, vampires lived in the human realm. The similarities in values and culture with demons were there, but so were the differences.

Demons and vampires used humans to their own ends without encroaching on each other's territory, and they had a common enemy in heaven's forces, the servants of the Christian God. Nonetheless, the two societies had kept at a distance for ages, never entering into any sort of alliance.

After reaching an accord with the other great powers, demons now sought to resolve the long-standing cold conflict. The vampires, however, had remained unwilling to take a seat at the negotiation table.

That's why they still occasionally clashed with heaven's forces—or rather, with warriors affiliated with the Church.

That was as far as my knowledge went. Well, that and the friction between the two major vampire blocs.

Basically, a major schism had divided vampire society several hundred years ago.

The result was the birth of two opposing groups, the Tsepesh bloc and the Carmilla bloc. The former considered men superior to women, while the latter took the opposite opinion.

It didn't make a lot of sense to me, but from what I gathered, these two sides had been at odds for centuries over whether revering male ancestors or female ones was the best way to preserve vampire lineages.

According to by Azazel's explanation, this woman, Elmenhilde, was a member of the matriarchal Carmilla bloc.

Elmenhilde took her seat. Once Akeno handed her a cup of tea, Rias jumped straight into the discussion.

"I apologize for asking this so bluntly, Elmenhilde, but could you tell us why you agreed to meet? The Carmillas have avoided contact with demons for generations, and yet you accepted the invitation to speak with representatives from the Gremory and Sitri houses and former governor, Azazel. What brought this sudden change in heart?"

Elmenhilde closed her eyes, pausing for a long moment before quietly opening them. "We would like to borrow Gasper Vladi for a short time."

"?!"

Everyone was absolutely flummoxed by this unexpected response. All eyes turned to Gasper.

Little Gaspy was visibly trembling. Clearly, he hadn't seen this coming, either. Well, I could hardly blame him.

I recalled his newly awakened abilities... Could *that* be what our vampire guest was after?

I had so many questions, but it was Azazel who spoke up next. “A blunt answer to a blunt question. Sorry, but can you explain it step-by-step...? What exactly is going on in vampire circles?”

“A certain event is unfolding in our world that has the potential to undermine our most fundamental values,” Elmenhilde began. “Information has already leaked, so you may already be aware of this, but a half-vampire in possession of a Longinus has emerged among the Tsepesh.”

...Ah, so that was what this was about. Come to think of it, I had heard rumor of a vampire Longinus user causing quite a stir...

It sounded like this was going to be more complicated than I thought. And the Longinus wasn't with Elmenhilde's Carmilla group, but with the other one, the Tsepesh?

In short, one side had a god-killing weapon, and the other one came to us to talk... This was definitely going to get messy!

Azazel's eyes narrowed. “And which Longinus are we talking about?”

Longinuses... After the anti-monster crisis, Azazel filled me in on the weapons.

There were thirteen of them in total, and demon forces were in possession of two—the Boosted Gear and the Regulus Nemea. In other words, my and Sairaorg's Pawn, Regulus.

Heaven's Joker was said to have the second-strongest one, the Zenith Tempest, while the fallen angels were in control of the Canis Lycaon, wielded by Slash Dog.

The Absolute Demise was part of the Council of Mages, the magic users affiliated with Mephisto Pheles. Meanwhile, the wielder of the Incinerate Anthem had joined a group of stray mages, making them a serious threat.

Vali, of course, had the Divine Dividing, while the Khaos Brigade's Hero Faction possessed three others: the True Longinus, the Annihilation Maker, and the Dimension Lost. But with the Hero Faction having been beaten back, the whereabouts of those last three were presently unknown... As far as anyone knew, those three Sacred Gears hadn't moved on to any new hosts...

Those were all the Longinuses we knew of. Most of that small handful had only been identified in recent years, a testament to how difficult finding a Longinus was.

The locations of the remaining three—the Sephiroth Graal, the Innovate Clear, and the Telos Karma—remained a mystery, and their powers weren't fully understood.

Rumor had it that Ajuka Beelzebub had a lead on the Innovate Clear, but that was still under investigation...

Taking all that into consideration, Elmenhilde likely referred to one of the other two, either the Sephiroth Graal or the Telos Karma. To think that vampires had acquired one of them...

“...It's the Sephiroth Graal,” Elmenhilde stated.

Azazel's expression turned even more grave. “Out of all the holy relics, it had to be the Holy Grail...”

Holy relics... Cao Cao's Holy Spear was one such item.

The Sephiroth Graal and the Incinerate Anthem were also holy relics. The former was said to be the Holy Grail from Christian tradition, while the latter was the True Cross.

“The chalice used in the Last Supper, where Jesus offered his blood as covenant,” Azazel continued. “It's a thing of legend. But the grail is no ordinary cup. That Longinus can upend the very principles of life itself... What would immortal vampires want with the likes of that, Elmenhilde?”

“An undying body, one that will not perish even if staked through the heart, nailed to a cross, forced to sleep outside one's coffin, or made to bask in direct sunlight. That is what the Tsepesh seek. Strictly speaking, it seems the Holy Grail's powers are not yet complete.” Elmenhilde paused for a moment before adding “They want to rid themselves of weakness. They would abandon their pride as vampires. And that isn't all. They attacked us. We have already suffered casualties. We have no intention of forgiving these outrages. As vampires, we must purge them from our ranks.”

Elmenhilde's eyes were dark, tinged with seething hatred.

She must have been truly disgusted the opposing faction had so vehemently spurned the vampire way of life, that it had turned against its own. Well, it was only natural to feel that way when you were the victim.

“So you’re saying the Tsepesh side has rejected the Carmilla bloc’s standards? Huh. I’d be upset if they attacked me, too,” Azazel remarked.

Elmenhilde nodded. “Precisely. Our aim...” She turned to Gasper, her crimson eyes meeting his. “Is to stop the Tsepesh by drawing on Gasper Vladi’s latent abilities.”

*Yep, I knew it.* This was going to be a mess, all right.

Basically, they wanted to recruit Gaspy into a war between rival vampire groups!

“Does this have anything to do with the fact that the Vladi family is associated with the Tsepesh side?” Rias questioned calmly.

She kept herself polite and elegant, but I knew her well enough to see past that facade. Deep inside, she was furious.

The vampires who’d spurned her every attempt at dialogue now demanded they borrow her cute little servant for war. There was no way she’d accept it easily.

All the same, she remained outwardly relaxed, hoping to learn as much as she could to better understand Gasper’s position. Having been with her for as long as I had, it was a remarkable change to observe firsthand.

Elmenhilde’s lips curled in a cryptic smile. “It does indeed, Rias Gremory. However, what we truly desire is Gasper Vladi’s powers. We’ve heard rumor they’ve awakened recently.”

...!

How could they have learned about his unleashing those insane powers?! I mean, I hadn’t seen them up close, but I knew just how impressive they were. He took out Georg from the Hero Faction, who possessed a god-killing Longinus, and was a master mage in his own right. Was that why these vampires wanted to pit Gasper up against another Longinus user?

“We seek to resolve this dispute ourselves, vampire to vampire,” Elmenhilde explained. “In order to do that, we hope to enlist Gasper Vladi’s help.”

She wanted to employ Gasper’s newfound powers to end the internal vampire quarrels? The situation sounded rough, but what did it have to do with us?

Gasper was born to the House of Vladi, but his family abandoned him, even drove him away. He was part of the Gremory Familia now, and I didn’t think he’d be eager to get stuck into a vampire conflict.

Nothing was more important than peace. Unless this trouble somehow endangered Gasper. Judging by the flow of the conversation, that sounded possible... What if the Tsepesh vampires threatened war if we didn’t hand back the shut-in vampire?

After so many awful conflicts, my brain immediately pictured the worst possible scenario.

Rias arched an eyebrow. “What are the powers you’re talking about, exactly? Have you seen them before?”

Straight to the point. How would Elmenhilde answer?

All eyes were on the vampire girl.

“While extremely rare, abilities far beyond those of our original bloodlines do occasionally manifest. In the present era, they are most often found in half-vampires. Gasper Vladi may be one such individual. We of the Carmilla do not presently have enough information to say for certain, but the Tsepesh may know more.”

So Gasper’s abilities exceeded those of normal vampires?

It sounded like we’d have to pay a visit to the Vladis for more info.

“Now, about the Holy Grail,” Elmenhilde continued. “It is currently held by an abomination. A half-breed named Valerie Tsepesh.”

Someone gasped at the mention of that name. It was Gasper. He looked like he was about to break into tears.

“Valerie? No, that’s impossible! She wasn’t born with a Sacred Gear like I



was!”

As soon as this Valerie entered the conversation, the jittery and anxious Gasper turned argumentative.

Was she important to him in some way?

“Sacred Gears can be awoken after one’s birth,” Elmenhilde continued. “You have experienced that yourself, I believe. Valerie...is similar. Her abilities have appeared rather recently.”

Elmenhilde was referring to me. My Sacred Gear only showed up in the past year. Apparently, they could manifest abruptly, and an individual’s age didn’t always influence when it happened.

Azazel crossed his arms. “I guess it’s safe to assume you covered up news of this Valerie,” he said with a scowl. “Otherwise, either the fallen angels or heaven would’ve caught wind of the Holy Grail. *Tch*. You guys are supposed to despise holy powers, but instead of entrusting a holy artifact to us, you hid it away.”

“I share your frustration,” Elmenhilde responded. Her eyes flicked back to Gasper, who, while obviously frightened, didn’t look away.

“Gasper Vladi. Do you not hold a grudge against the House of Vladi, against the Tsepesh, for their mistreatment of you and your banishment? With your current abilities, you might be able to exact vengeance on them.”

“I-I’m happy with my life now. I want to stay here with the president and the others and—”

“Mongrel.”

Gasper’s expression darkened the moment Elmenhilde uttered the word.

She kept on going. “Half-breed. Abomination. Did the Vladis call you such names? The one soul who shared in your torment was Valerie of the House of Tsepesh, no? I hear you both supported each other during your temporary imprisonment in the Tsepesh’s fortress. You don’t wish to stop her?”

Sister Griselda, who’d kept mostly quiet, suddenly said “Your kind abhors half-breeds, but it was the wanton cruelty and selfishness of individual vampires

abducting and abusing human women that ultimately resulted in the birth of these children, is it not? The task of comforting those victims, of attempting to ease their anguish, ultimately falls on us in the Church. We would prefer that your people not treat human beings as your mere playthings.”

Her manner was gentle, but her tone there was full of venom! And her smile was unwavering! Yep, she was every bit Xenovia’s and Irina’s former boss!

Elmenhilde raised a hand to her mouth to cover a smile. “I am sorry about that. But it is in our nature to hunt humans. I believe angels and demons are much the same, no? You require human faith, or else fulfill human desires in exchange for payment. We supernatural beings are weak creatures, capable of surviving only by feeding on humans, no?”

Yes, demons weren’t righteous, by any means. A great many humans had ended up recruited into demon Familias through underhanded methods.

But I was no longer human. The only choice left to me was to live as a demon... And yet I was constantly trapped between both worlds. That was my life now.

This vampire girl was wholly on the supernatural side—she saw humans as mere prey, not as equals. To her, nothing was a fair exchange—there was only the hunt, an entirely one-sided affair.

I hated what I saw in her eyes, the way she looked at others with the utmost contempt.

On top of that, she had gone so far as to call Gasper a *mongrel*, an *abomination*...

I knew that vampires were even more obsessed with hierarchy and purity of blood than demons were, but seeing Elmenhilde up close drove the point home—in their world, there were only pure-blooded vampires and everyone else.

Elmenhilde summoned one of the vampires attending her, who retrieved a bundle of papers from his bag.

“I didn’t come here empty-handed. I have a written proposal for you,” she said, handing the document to Azazel.

Azazel flicked through the various pages, then breathed a deep sigh. “A peace conference with the Carmilla bloc?”

“?????????????!”

We all gasped!

She was playing the diplomacy card?! I could hardly believe it! All this time, they hadn’t shown the slightest interest in compromise!

Azazel placed the bundle of papers on the table before addressing Elmenhilde. “Let me get this straight. This meeting... You were dispatched here as an envoy?”

Elmenhilde’s lips curled in a soft smile. “Yes. Queen Carmilla, deeply concerned by the many years of conflict between our people and your three powers, has expressed her desire for a truce.”

I couldn’t fail to notice a blue vein throbbing on Azazel’s forehead.

“You’ve got this backward, lady. This peace offer should have come first, and all that talk about the Longinus second. The way you did this, you’re basically saying if we don’t help you, there will be no peace. You’re blackmailing us.”

Sister Griselda, feigning calm, narrowed her eyes. “Our three great powers have been openly extending offers of peace and friendship to all who will accept it. As such, if we don’t agree to your terms, our devotion will be called into question in the eyes of rival factions. They will accuse us of preaching peace to our enemies while being selective in how we subscribe to it ourselves. Moreover, this proposal is not an accord, merely a suspension of hostilities... You seek to exploit our vulnerabilities.”

“ ... ”

*D-despicable!* Those vampires had the audacity to demand we loan them Gasper under the guise of peace, all but threatening to ruin Rias’s reputation if we refused to comply, and Sirzechs’s, too?! Rias had made a name for herself fighting all those terrorists and as the Switch Princess, so if we rejected this offer, her reputation would suffer a huge blow!

Rias shook all over in anger. Chairwoman Sona placed a hand on Rias’s in an

effort to calm her down.

All the while, Elmenhilde's smile remained unwavering. "Rest assured, this dispute between vampires will be resolved between vampires. If you lend us Gasper Vladi, we will not ask anything more of you. We will promise you a seat at the peace table, and we will act as intermediaries in your dealings with the Vladi family."

I could hold myself back no longer.

"Hold on," I interrupted. "Even if we sent Gasper to join you, how do we know you'll return him safely? Not that we've agreed to hand him over yet!"

Sending Gaspy into conflict without any guarantee of his safety... I'd never let that happen. He was my precious underclassman!

Elmenhilde turned to me with a look of disdain. "You are a servant to the high-class demon Rias Gremory, no? What gives you the right to speak to *me*, a diplomatic envoy? You may be the Red Dragon Emperor, but you are a mere retainer, devoid of authority and qualification. How dare you raise your voice against me?"

—!

My head felt like it might explode with anger. I wanted to shout, "Damn you!" But if I did, this whole meeting fall apart!

*Ugh! That woman! What gives her the right to treat us that way?! I can't let her just take Gasper!*

She was telling us to hand Gasper over in exchange for peace in that infuriating tone of hers!

Kiba raised a hand to hold me back, glancing meaningfully at Rias. She let out a deep sigh, perhaps trying to calm down.

It was Azazel who responded in her stead. "To put this bluntly, you want the heir to the House of Gremory to sacrifice one of her Familia members for a truce between demons and vampires? Basically, that's what you're demanding, isn't it?" he said.

"There's nothing to say he will be *sacrificed*. We simply wish to bring this issue

to a swift conclusion,” Elmenhilde answered, still acting maddeningly superior.

“And yet you don’t want us to interfere? We could mediate between the two sides, or even support one over the other. You’re only chasing after Gasper because your people lack the strength to win otherwise,” Azazel pointed out.

Elmenhilde shook her head. “We will settle this matter on our own terms. However, if you wish to advise, then by all means.”

How selfish could they be? These pure-blooded vampires didn’t care about anyone but themselves. They persecuted their half-blooded kin to no end, then used them like tools.

It was so callous! So cruel and unfair!

Elmenhilde glanced at all of us before rising to her feet. “That is all I have to say. It was a pleasure to speak with you tonight. I would like to express my gratitude for your generous gesture of inviting a vampire into your territory, Rias Gremory.”

Rias fumed when faced with Elmenhilde’s fake, icy smile. Her eyes radiated raw, unbridled anger.

“Yes. I’m glad we had this opportunity. I feel I understand you all much better now.”

“Then I bid you farewell. I will leave you with one of my servants. Should you require anything from us, please consult with him... I shall await your response.”

Elmenhilde, without so much as acknowledging Rias’s sarcastic remark, promptly left the old school building and disappeared into the dark night.

-○○●○-

Around ten minutes after the end of the meeting, Xenovia broke the silence by slamming her hand down on the table. “Vampires! They never change! I *hate* them!”

She’d shown extraordinary restraint during the meeting, honestly. I sensed her rage all throughout the talk.

Sister Griselda sipped from her teacup before replying. “The old you would’ve lashed out with the Durendal, Xenovia. You endured her insults well. You’ve

grown.”

Xenovia seemed conflicted at this praise.

She was right to be angry. I found myself resenting those vampires, too! I mean, what *was* that? They couldn’t be any more different from Gasper! He spent his time hiding in cardboard boxes, while they were walking embodiments of insult and weird pride!

Chairwoman Sona, the only one of us who’d managed to keep calm, turned to Rias. “What are you going to do? You can’t ignore this proposal. But if you go along with it, you may be forced to send Gasper away... We could lose him.”

Gasper looked away, obviously troubled.

That came as no surprise. I doubt he ever expected to become a bargaining chip. We were kind of in a bind, though. Refusing would be extremely difficult. Declining an offer from the vampires after seeking peace with them for so long would cause an uproar.

From a purely political point of view, giving up one person in exchange for a truce with half of vampire society was an easy trade...

I was absolutely mortified. If at all possible, I wanted to refuse Elmenhilde’s offer, but that would lead to the worst possible outcome for the House of Gremory.

Gasper took a deep breath. “I-I’ll go,” he said, voice trembling.

—!

Was he *volunteering*?

“I don’t *want* to go back there...,” he continued, determination alight in his eyes. “*This* is my home. B-but I want to help Valerie! I...I owe her... She’s the reason I got out of that castle and found my way here... I died once, but now I have a kind master and good friends who play with me all the time... I’m happy. Knowing that she’s still suffering... I can’t stand it... I’m sure they’re treating her horribly!” Gasper locked eyes with Rias. “I’ll save her! And I won’t die! I’ll come back alive!”

Now *that* was a powerful response. Our cardboard-box vampire had

developed the unyielding resolve of a grown man.

He'd made this decision himself.

I patted him on the head.

Yep. He was a true man of the Gremory Familia.

Rias stood at her servant's show of determination. "I'll go as well. To speak to the Vladis directly. I want to see this dispute with my own eyes. We can decide how to respond to the situation with Gasper afterward."

Her gaze was hard and uncompromising. I guess the plan was to visit the Carmilla vampires in person, then.

Gasper's resolve must have lit a fire in her! Heck, it resonated with me, as well! I mean, rescuing a girl who used to look out for you? For a man, it didn't get any better than that!

"Then I'll—"

But before I could finish, Rias shook her head. "No. You and the others should wait here. There's no telling what might happen."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Rias raised two fingers. "It's entirely appropriate for me, Gasper's master, to pay a visit directly. No offense will be taken. And there are two other reasons for you to stay here. First, to ensure that you can take immediate action in case of an emergency. We may come under attack, so we need to enough forces here to respond. Second..." Rias paused to look at each of us. "If something *does* happen to me, I'll need all of you to be ready to come back me up."

"Are you anticipating trouble?" Kiba asked. "Or that we might be dragged into this conflict?"

"I hope it doesn't come to that, but given past events and the vampires' cold treatment of us, it's a distinct possibility. I wouldn't be at all surprised if things turn sour."

"Then wouldn't it be better if we came along from the start?" I suggested.

Just as I expected, however, Rias shook her head. "If we approach them as a

group, they'll assume we're hostile... It'll make negotiation even more challenging. Going alone is best. The vampires have refused to talk until now. We need to be careful not to scare them off. I can only hope I'm not being too naive about this..." Rias's eyes went to Azazel.

"No, this isn't a bad approach for the leader of a power-pushing Familia. But I don't think it's smart to go by yourself. All this stuff between the Tsepesh and the Carmilla blocs doesn't add up. There's got to be something they aren't telling us," Teach replied.

"Then I'll take one person as an escort...my Knight. Is that okay with you, Yuuto?"

"Leave it to me, President."

If Kiba was going with her, then it would be fine.

"I don't have any problems if Kiba's tagging along." I knew what he was capable of better than anyone. We'd traded countless blows during practice. He was a true Knight.

"I'll go, too," Azazel declared. "I should see the Carmilla bloc first, and ensure they'll accept sending in a few of you guys if things turn nasty. I'll bring 'em a few gifts to get 'em to open their hearts a little. You should go straight to the Vladis, Rias. Dropping in on the Carmilla bloc folks will just agitate them and make them suspicious."

*Bribing them with gifts? Clever.* That was Azazel for you. He was never one to quit!

If a few of us could join Gasper, that meant he'd be in less danger. We might even be able to save that girl with the Holy Grail.

"Won't people ask questions if you go, Teach?" I asked. "I mean, you're one of the highest-ranking fallen angels."

*Surely, someone less conspicuous would be a better choice.*

"Nah. The vampires still have skirmishes with heaven and the Church, so it's best that a fallen angel goes. Besides, I'm an expert scholar on all things related to Sacred Gears, so I can leverage that knowledge if need be."



“You mean with the Holy Grail?”

“Yeah. Not to be bigheaded or anything, but I’m guessing I’m the one they most wanted to see today,” Azazel turned to the two emissaries from heaven. “Irina, Sister Griselda. Tell Michael what happened here. All this talk about vampires and the Holy Grail—there’s definitely something fishy going on.”

Sister Griselda nodded. “Understood. Lord Michael brought up the possibility of activating his Joker, though he would prefer to avoid a worst-case scenario.”

Azazel seemed mildly surprised to hear this. “He’d send his Joker out so quickly? You guys are upping the ante, huh? I suppose I can’t be too surprised considering how many crazy heavyweights have been coming after us. With the Holy Grail involved, we genuinely might need your Joker’s help... Vampires and the Holy Grail... Light and dark are inherently incompatible... There’s no way this will end well. I guess we’ll just have to do our best to keep casualties to a minimum.”

“That is the hope of the Four Great Seraphs, and why they are proactively considering deploying that lazy Joker.” Sister Griselda sighed. “Honestly, that boy’s always running off to indulge himself. He’s even worse than Xenovia in that regard.”

I hadn’t met this Joker, but it sounded like Sister Griselda knew him personally.

Well, that was a matter for later. Right now, we had to get our plan in order.

Ultimately, we decided that Rias and Kiba would pay a visit to the Vladis, while Azazel would meet with the Carmilla bloc leaders. The rest of us, Gasper included, would remain here. If, for whatever reason, Rias needed backup, we’d hurry out to help.

I hoped nothing unexpected happened... But according to Azazel, conflict seemed inevitable.

Naturally, I hoped for minimal casualties, but something told me this wasn’t going to be easy...

Yet my only option was to shake away my building sense of unease and support Rias and the others as best I could.

With that, our late-night meeting came to an end, the air filled with fierce determination and gnawing anxiety...

-○○●○-

After the meeting, I joined Azazel in one of the other rooms in the old school building so he could take a look at my gauntlet.

Ever since the battle with the Hero Faction in the underworld, Ddraig was sleeping much more than he used to. As a result, I couldn't draw on my full Sacred Gear powers.

Azazel had been doing regular checkups on my Boosted Gear to monitor things.

"The jewel is still pretty dull," he said. "It just goes to show how much power he had to exert to form that new body for you."

"U-um, Teach? He *is* going to get better, right?"

"Sure, if he can replenish his power, he should go back to the way he was before. He's basically just resting to recover his strength. More importantly, though, we've got to talk about your life force."

"I remember you said it didn't make any sense, right?"

Azazel nodded.

Yes, a piece of the Great Red's flesh and the combined efforts of Ophis and Ddraig created a new physical form for me after my original body was destroyed.

As a result, my life force, which had already been significantly depleted, could no longer be reliably analyzed.

"The powers of two legendary dragons flow in you, and your life force readings have been going haywire. Sometimes they show zero, sometimes they're theoretically infinite. That zero is probably coming from the Great Red. And the infinite readings are obviously from Ophis."

"Does that mean I'm constantly dying and then coming back or something?" I questioned.

"No idea. There's no precedent for this. You're a reincarnated demon who's

been reborn again as a humanoid dragon. At the very least, we should be able to better stabilize your condition. You've already had some success with that, right?"

As Azazel said, Rias and Akeno were still draining the dragon energy from me, and Koneko regularly used her sage arts to treat my soul. No doubt that was why my paradoxical life force readings had temporarily returned to something closer to normal.

"Anyway, I'm not sure how those zero and infinity reactions will even out," Azazel continued. "For all I know, you might suddenly run out of juice, or your powers could spike and overheat. You need to keep letting Rias and the others take care of you."

I just needed to ask them to continue their treatment.

*Ha-ha-ha! Awesome!* I was beyond overjoyed to hear that those wonderful hours together would continue! Being kissed all over by Rias and Akeno, and cuddling with Koneko. I owed the True Dragon and Dragon God big-time for this gift! When I got home, I'd have to do something nice for Ophis!

Rias's and Akeno's absorption techniques were improving...and Koneko was growing increasingly bold. Just the other day, she'd suggested that the healing effect of her sage arts might be stronger if she could work on me without clothes!

*"Squishy, squishy, ooooooh!"*

—!

Out of nowhere, that damn catchphrase sprung into my mind.

*Gimme a break, Great Red! You're going to make me cry the next time we meet! Seriously, this is embarrassing!*

While I struggled with a shameful memory, Azazel laughed gently. "Remember to keep a cool head when you fight. It's not easy, but I know you can. Your problem is you let your emotions get the better of you. Remember when you fought Bael's Queen? Normally, you would've ripped her clothes to shreds and worshiped her nude body, right? But you got carried away after seeing your friends defeated one after the other. Another mistake like that

against a stronger opponent will be fatal.”

I deserved that scolding. Truthfully, I did make a habit of acting on impulse. Could I have defeated Sairaorg’s Queen with my Dress Break technique? Now that I stopped to think about it, I’d completely missed the chance to see her naked... But I’d done the best I could at the time.

“Well, you’re only seventeen. You, Rias, and the rest of your group—you’re still young. No one’s perfect from the start.”

Would my libido settle down as I grew older? I couldn’t see that happening! I wanted to be just as sex-focused ten years from now—no, a *hundred* years from now! One thing was certain, Rias’s breasts would still be gorgeous in the years to come!

Putting that thought aside, I asked, “So when are you planning on going, Teach?”

“Well, I’ve gotta talk everything through with Rias first. This is a good opportunity, so if we don’t try everything we can with these vampires, we’ll regret it later.”

All I could do was hope that everything went well...

Kiba and Azazel would be there for backup. With any luck, Rias wouldn’t end up in danger, but it was tough not to worry.

All I wanted was for these meetings with the various vampire groups to stay peaceful.

We still had to sort out our mage pacts, but that had to be put on hold. The Gremory Familia had a more urgent matter for now.

*Get better soon, Ddraig. I can’t give it my all without you. Partner... We’ll charge ahead together when you’re better, okay?*

As I stared down at my gauntlet, Azazel breathed a knowing sigh. “Do you know how many dragons have been wiped out? How many souls have been locked away in Sacred Gears? How many might be gone forever? Look after him, you got that? He might only exist as a soul, but he’s still a one-of-a-kind legendary dragon.”

O-of course I would take care of him! Though I had to admit that being stuck with the Breast Dragon had caused him no end of trouble!

The next moment, Azazel put his hands together as if suddenly remembering something. "...Right, one more thing. We got some information from Vali."

"Vali?"

"You know how he likes running about all over, looking into one unexplained phenomenon or another, right?"

Yes, like Azazel, his foster parent, the White Dragon Emperor loved traveling the world, seeking out and unraveling all sorts of mysteries.

"Seems wherever he goes, he keeps bumping into people from the Khaos Brigade."

"Isn't that because the Khaos Brigade is out to kill him?" I asked.

Vali was currently being pursued by the Khaos Brigade for handing Ophis over to us. Then again, his group had always been on bad terms with the organization's other factions.

"Vali was searching for some kind of...vicious, long-extinct creature," Azazel continued. "He claims to have a lead suggesting they might still be alive. For someone who loves seeking out strong foes to fight, he seems pretty bored... Anyway, they searched for dens of extinct creatures—vanquished dragons, for the most part—and found that mages from the Khaos Brigade kept beating them to the punch... Seeing as it's happened a few times now, it can't be a coincidence."

"Vanquished dragons... Any famous ones?" I asked.

"Probably none you'd recognize... There's the Crescent Circle Dragon, Crom Cruach; the Diabolism Thousand Dragon, Azhi Dahaka; and the Eclipse Dragon, Apophis. Ah, those names bring back memories. They were real threats back in the day, so brutal they all got exterminated or sealed. There's also Nidhogg from Norse mythology. Grendel, who the original Beowulf defeated. And Ladon, the one the original Hercules beat to get at the golden apples. We can't forget about Japan's Yamata no Orochi, either."

It was one unfamiliar name after another. The only ones I recognized were Yamata no Orochi and Crom Cruach. Were there really so many super-powerful dragons in the past? And now they were all gone?

“Crom Cruach, Azhi Dahaka, and Apophis are considered Evil Dragons, but they’re gone now. So is Vritra, but he’s small fry compared to those other three.”

Evil Dragons? The name sent a shiver down my spine. Were they really extinct?

“They were all that bad?”

“Heck, Vritra’s soul had to be divided into pieces, each locked in separate Sacred Gears. Those Evil Dragons were so strong that nothing else could keep ’em down. Vritra’s consciousness has reawakened, though, what with those Sacred Gears merging together. Evil Dragons are nothing if not tenacious. And Crom Cruach, Azhi Dahaka, and Apophis lead the pack.”

*Whoa.* Vritra gave me the creeps, but those other three were even stronger?

“...How do the Two Heavenly Dragons compare?” I almost didn’t want to know.

“In their prime, the Red and the White would’ve won out. But you’d better steer clear of Evil Dragons as much as you can. Ditto for anything even remotely close to their level. Those things are a real handful. I don’t see it ending well if you go up against one.”

An encounter with an Evil Dragon was best avoided? Fine by me...

“But it’s been a long time since anyone’s said anything about dead dragons, let alone Evil Dragons,” Azazel continued, resting a hand on his chin. “You know what I mean, right? Most dragons with that much strength, the kind that go rampaging and wreaking havoc, they’ve been wiped out. Tiamat, the strongest of the Five Great Dragon Kings, knew what she was doing when she decided to lay low and blend into society.”

Rampaging dragons. That sounded pretty similar to Ddraig and Albion, who got so carried away that the three great powers decided to team up to take them down.

“I prefer dragons like Tannin, majestic and imposing,” I remarked. “He acts like a real Dragon King. It’s pretty cool.”

Yeah, old Tannin was the most kingly of any dragon I’d ever met. His willingness to risk himself to protect others of his kind was truly admirable!

Azazel seemed to share my opinion. “You’re right about that. If you’re going to get involved with legendary dragons, you can’t go wrong with him. *He’s* a real Dragon King. There are no others like him anymore, so learn everything you can from him.”

You betcha! I would become a cool dragon like him...! No, a dragon harem king!

“Whatever the case, it seems those terrorists are still plotting trouble... Be prepared for anything.”

“Right.”

Azazel rested a hand on my head. “Sorry. You guys are being thrown into some serious trouble again.”

“No kidding,” I answered. “It’s a real pain. But if they come at us, the only thing we can do is push back like we have in the past.”

I wasn’t Koneko, but like her, I would send anyone who came after us flying. To survive, we had to be strong enough to knock down any foes. That was the Gremory Familia! No, Kuou Academy’s Occult Research Club!

Azazel stretched. “Well, I’ve got some business to take care of over in the underworld.”

“Hmm? What?” I asked.

His lips curled in a lecherous grin. Ah, yep. He was up to no good, all right.

“I’m selling some land.”

*Land?*

“Come on, even you know the underworld’s divided into demon and fallen angel regions, right?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“Well, the thing is, we fallen angels have a lot of empty plots, considering our population. Basically, our people are made up of pure fallen angels, species that have joined us, and offspring born to fallen angels and other races. Our numbers are pretty small compared to demons. It puts our continued existence at risk. Unlike you guys and regular angels, we don’t have a reincarnation system.”

Right. They could, if they wanted to, but the Grigori had intentionally refrained from instituting their own method of creating new fallen angels.

“Anyway, it would be a shame if the line of bad angels ended with us,” Azazel said. “So... We’re planning on using our surplus land to develop resort areas for our alliance forces. There are some big plans for commercial facilities, even casinos. Orders are already pouring in for villas and vacation homes. I reckon this’ll be a huge boon for us. Even we need funds to sustain ourselves.”

I see... So the fallen angels—the Grigori—had started business ventures. From what I’d heard, most of their income already came from things like that.

Knowing Azazel, he’d make a great salesperson.

A knock at the door interrupted our conversation.

“Azazel?” Rias asked, stepping inside. “Have you finished examining Issei? We need to work out our schedule for leaving Japan.”

“Oh, yeah. Actually, there’s something Asia ought to hear... Do you mind if she joins us?” Azazel replied.

“Not at all,” Rias said. “Is it about *that*? I’m glad it seems to be going smoothly. I hear Ophis has been a great help.”

*Something about Asia...? And Ophis is involved in some way?*

And so we began to discuss Rias’s, Kiba’s, and Azazel’s departure.

—○●○—

*“You may be the Red Dragon Emperor, but you are a mere retainer, devoid of authority or qualification. How dare you raise your voice against me?”*

Before sunrise the next morning, I was taking a shower in the oversize basement below my family home. I’d gotten out of bed early, without waking



Rias or Asia.

I couldn't stop thinking about what that Carmilla vampire—Elmenhilde—had said last night.

*A mere servant, without any right to speak my mind...*

She wasn't wrong. I was famous as the Breast Dragon in the underworld, but to everyone else, I was Rias Gremory's Pawn, her Red Dragon Emperor. I couldn't argue with the truth.

When it came to these kinds of diplomatic meetings, I was beyond useless.

Sure, I had gotten along okay with the Odin, that old Norse geezer, and the same with the *yokai* of Kyoto, but those were special cases. Ultimately, as far as other groups were concerned, I was just a mediocre mid-level demon.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't trying to get ahead of myself, but not being able to help Rias sure was frustrating.

*Damn it all.*

If I was going to protect my younger friends—if I was going to help Gasper—I needed more than just raw strength...

No, I couldn't get ahead of myself... I just had to do everything in my power to protect them. Diplomacy was the job of Sirzechs and Azazel and the others. I had to focus on what I *could* do.

Still, I gritted my teeth in frustration. The lukewarm water pouring from the showerhead helped keep my fury in check.

"I'm pathetic... Dammit. I *will* become a high-class demon... I made a promise with Kiba, for crying out loud."

Right before the mid-level demon promotion exam, we talked about our plans for the future, to become ultimate-class demons.

"He's aiming to be the strongest Knight, and I'll be the mightiest Pawn..."

While I was talking to myself to clear my doubts and renew my determination, the door quietly slid open.

I spun around, and...

...Ravel was standing there, completely naked!

*Huuuhhh?!*

“...Issei?”

“Sorry! I didn’t know anyone else used the bathroom this early in the morning!”

I wasted no time apologizing! This bath was the girls’ territory! I used it, too, but I typically let them go first! Though there *were* times we bumped into each other and bathed together!

But Ravel was our guest, and my underclasswoman, to boot! I had to get out now!

Sh-she was stark naked! Ravel had a small figure, but it was wonderfully feminine in all aspects! Who could have guessed her breasts would be so full! And with her ringleted hair let down, she was like a totally different person!

*No!* I had to stop myself! This wasn’t the time!

“I-I’ll wash your back!” she declared all of a sudden.

“...”

My mind went completely blank at those words. I had never expected to hear that.

“How’s that?”

“Y-yeah. That’s good...”

I wasn’t sure how exactly it came about, but Ravel was sitting behind me washing my back.

I’d expected her to lash out with fiery wings, shrieking at the top of her lungs and calling me a pervert. Instead, she was being surprisingly bold. I didn’t know what to make of this!

Unable to bear the thought of an awkward silence, I tried to keep the conversation going by bringing up the vampire meeting last night.



“She’s the first pure-blooded vampire I’ve ever met...” I began. “I don’t get it... I got along with Gasper pretty quickly, but that woman...”

Ravel didn’t look too pleased with that noble lady, either. “I couldn’t stand her. Partly because she wanted to take my friend away as part of her deal. However, she just struck me as the type who doesn’t care about anyone except herself. I suppose this is all politics from her perspective... It’s difficult. We don’t want to put Gasper in harm’s way, of course, but demons are calculating, and we also value purity of blood... *I’m* a pure-blooded demon.”

*Right.* Ravel was the eldest daughter of the House of Phenex, making her a pure-blooded, high-class demon with all that entailed.

“But even pure-blooded demons can choose their friends,” she continued. “Koneko, Gasper, and all my other classmates are so nice to me, though I do feel guilty having to hide my true identity from them... It would be so wonderful if we could all choose our friends regardless of race or background.”

*Hmm.* Ravel acted aloof, but deep down, she was pure and innocent at heart.

*Hiding one’s identity, huh...*

There was no way I could tell Matsuda and Motohama that I was a demon, not without putting them in danger. During our time at Kuou Academy, at least, I hoped we could all remain friends in peace and safety.

“She made me realize how small I was,” I continued. “I wish I could have said something back to her. That one day, I would show her by becoming a respectable demon myself.”

Here I was dreaming of the top again. I wouldn’t let her get away with looking down on me like that.

“H-have you given any thought to your future Familia, Issei...?” Ravel asked, after rinsing my back.

“My Familia? You mean once I become a high-class demon? I haven’t thought that far ahead yet...”

With the Evil Pieces, you could recruit fifteen Familia members at most. Of course, multiple pieces were occasionally necessary to recruit someone.

“Asia and Xenovia said something about wanting to follow me, and Rias said she’s willing to trade for them. Nothing’s set in stone, though. It would make things easier if they came with me, but how would that affect Rias, parting with three of her people all at once? I’m not sure how she would make up for that loss...”

No sooner did I finish speaking than a thought came to me—that it sure would be reassuring if Ravel stayed on as my manager.

Ravel seemed to read my mind. “I’d like to continue working as your manager,” she said.

“Ah, thank you. You don’t know how happy I am to hear that.”

Just as the mood started to improve...

*Splash!*

...a figure emerged in the middle of the bath!

“I stayed underwater for thirty minutes.”

Ophis, the Dragon God herself, rose from the water. Had she really been in here for half an hour?!

Hold on, I didn’t see any clothes in the changing room!

Did she walk here from her room completely naked?!

*Cut me some slack, O Dragon God! Not even the former Ouroboros Dragon should stroll around the house naked!*

Ravel and I were making plans for the future, but now the atmosphere was ruined!

“Heh-heh. I’m no match for Ophis,” Ravel said.

*Damn right.* None of us stood a chance against our group’s cute mascot.

## Mages for the Khaos Brigade

“Any word from the stray mages?”

“All’s good. Sounds like they’re enjoyin’ themselves. No wonder the Council of Mages kicked ’em out.”

“Hah. I guess we’re in no position to judge after joining with a terrorist group. So, is their leader really going to go through with it?”

“He ain’t got no choice. It’s what the boss wants.”

“This is insane. Shalba and Cao Cao were out of their minds, but this is equally crazy.”

“Dangerous work comes with the territory. There’s no turning back now.”

“Hey, the leader’s called in. They’re ready to move... You know, if not for those guys, we all would’ve been done for. We owe it to them to follow the plan. Still, a proper life would’ve been nice. But this is what we’ve got, so we might as well enjoy it to the fullest.”

“We keep bumping into Vali’s group everywhere we go. It must be fate.”

“They say dragons are like magnets for powerful people. Why fight it? I say we have some fun—dragon against dragon.”

## Life.3

### Stray Mages

Several days passed since the meeting with our vampire guest, and it was time for Rias's departure. Her destination, apparently, was deep in the mountains of Romania.

After school, I decided to focus on my training in the basement at home until her preparations were complete. I had to make every minute count, which meant getting in some practice.

The girls were helping her get ready, but as a guy, I would only get in the way. Left with nothing else to do, I decided to train.

Ever since that vampire meeting, our group training sessions had been put on hold. Given the complicated situation, our mage selection process had likewise been suspended.

Demon life was busy enough, and we still had to keep up with school during the day. Our schedules were simply too hectic, but that was no excuse for growing sloppy, so I had to practice.

Looking back, though, maybe I should've spent the time teaching my familiar. My little Skidbladnir, the living airship, was buzzing around me!

I'd finally decided on its name just the other day. Heh-heh. It was a pretty good one, if I do say so myself.

When I reached the training room, Kuroka and Le Fay were already inside.

Both sat on the floor, reading the same thick, difficult-looking book.

"I didn't know you guys were here," I said.

Just as they'd promised, the two dropped in every now and then, helping themselves to the fridge and drinking our milk and stuff!

Every time, my mom was left in abject shock, Rias blew her top...and Le Fay apologized on Kuroka's behalf.

"Oh, sorry. We let ourselves in. Please excuse us," Le Fay replied.

At least, *she*, had some manners!

"*Meow*. Hiya there."

By this point, my home had basically become a den for the supernatural. There were demons, angels, and even the Dragon God. What a chaotic mix...

I stole a look at their book as I walked over. Diagrams of the human body with illustrations of power emanating from the hands filled the pages.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A book about life," Kuroka said with a smirk. "Auras, sage arts, fighting spirit, those sorts of things."

Huh. So why were they reading? I knew Kuroka was into that sort of thing, but why here? Why now?

Left with unanswered questions, I tilted my head to one side.

"Kuroka is researching ways to better teach her sister," Le Fay explained with a soft smile.

Ah, so that was it! That was awfully mature of her!

"Sage arts is based on knowledge of the flow of qi—in oneself, in others, and in nature," Kuroka said while stroking the book's cover. "First of all, you need to focus your mind, to sit in quiet meditation. You need to return to the flow of energy, to be one with the world around you, *meow*. That's the most basic principle of sage arts, but it's still the best way to grow. So I need to start by sitting in meditation."

"Knowing you, I thought you'd be up to no good—but you're taking this big sister thing more seriously than I thought," I teased.

Kuroka pulled a sour face. "How rude, *meow*. I'm a woman of action when I have to be."

"Says the woman who tried to do in Koneko and me with poison mist."



When I first met Kuroka in the underworld, her depravity was beyond compare—she attacked me, Rias, and her own sister, Koneko, without the slightest hint of mercy.

Now, however, she casually deflected my criticism and gave me a cute wink. “I just felt a little mischievous seeing Shirone again! Heh-heh, *meow*! They say even the most unscrupulous of folks can win people over with a little kindness, no? I caught *your* attention, didn’t I, Red Dragon Emperor?”

I couldn’t deny that, but she was still one bad cat!

And what was with that weird laugh? She’d literally tried to kill us not too long ago. Though I guess there was nothing to be gained pointing that out now. *Maybe she did do it all on a whim...?*

“You need to make peace with Koneko sooner or later,” I told her.

A touch of sorrow entered Kuroka’s eyes...

*Stop it! Don’t try making me feel sorry for you with your beautiful looks!*

“You’re right... But it might be too late. I did what I could for her, but in the end, she still suffered.”

As Kuroka said, after she slew her former master, Koneko was left to bear the consequences of that betrayal. Sirzechs had come to her defense...but it still took her a long time to recover from that trauma and return to a normal life.

Undoubtedly, poor Koneko carried a lot of anger for her sister for the betrayal and all those adults for their mistreatment. And she wasn’t entirely wrong to do so.

“I know it will probably be hard, but when the time comes, I’ll help you both patch things up,” I said.

Kuroka was Koneko’s only sister. If they were willing to reconcile, I wouldn’t hesitate to lend a hand.

After all, I wanted to see Koneko happy. Kuroka stared back at me in wide-eyed astonishment.

“...” Then she broke out into a fit of laughter. “*Meow-ha-ha*! Yes, I see... Very well. No wonder you’ve won everyone’s hearts, Red Dragon Emperor. You’re

much more charming than your average heartthrob.”

“Thanks, I guess. I kind of wish I *was* an average heartthrob, though. Being the Red Dragon Emperor is pretty tough.”

I could barely count how many powerful opponents had come chasing after us or all the times we’d been forced into a life-or-death struggle. Heck, I’d already died once.

“How are your mage negotiations going?” Le Fay asked, changing the subject.

“So-so,” I answered. “There are so many applicants, we’re still screening.”

Le Fay smiled. “I’ve heard you’re very popular.”

Rias had received the most offers, and she still took care of her demon work, her studies, her responsibilities as our Familia’s King, and all the extra stuff from this vampire problem.

My burden simply didn’t compare. Her responsibilities were impossibly heavier.

Being a high-class demon, being a King, meant looking out for an entire Familia... Would I be up to it if I was promoted to that level? Until that time came, I just had to support Rias and keep pushing forward.

Speaking of pushing forward, I had Skidbladnir, and this was a good opportunity to learn how to use it better.

“Hey, Le Fay? If you were to teach me magic, do you think I could learn to use it?” I asked.

My familiar, my Skidbladnir, was a magical airship, so it would do to know at least a little magic. Especially if I was going to be dealing with mages from here on out.

Le Fay nodded. “I’m not sure what kind of magic you have in mind, but being a demon, you should have a better aptitude for developing a good foundation than most people. You should be able to succeed with enough effort and perseverance. By the way, you’re aware of the difference between demon powers and magic, aren’t you?”

“Ah, yeah. Demon powers are all about manifesting your imagination, while

magic is about invoking supernatural phenomena. Right?" I said.

"To put it simply. Demon powers require imagination, creativity, and a sense of taste. Magic requires a knowledge of how to work with formulas and equations, a sharp mind, and the ability to quickly run mental calculations. They may seem superficially similar, but they're really quite different."

"Huh. Maybe I won't be suited to it after all."

I was hopeless at math! And on top of that, manipulating supernatural phenomena with spells was another of my weak points! The best I could manage were my Dress Break and Boob-Lingual techniques!

"You should be able to learn some simple magic that doesn't require much calculation," Le Fay replied. "Magic to warm up a coffee, for instance, or to see through walls."

—!

*T-to see through walls?! Will it work on other substances, too?! Now that had my attention!*

If I mastered it, I might be able to see through women's clothing!

"Basically, magic is only possible if you know the laws of cause and effect, *meow*," Kuroka summed up. "You can't create phenomena you don't understand. There are mages who pull off tricks based on nothing more than talent and instinct, but they're super, super, super, *super* rare."

Maybe that's why Rossweisse excelled more with magic than demon powers; because she found running mathematical equations easier than conceptualizing her imagination.

*Hmm.* Perhaps I'd be able to learn a few tricks.

I doubted I would be able to master magic, but this sounded much better than I'd expected!

I'd just have to chat with Rossweisse and Le Fay, and if it helped me understand my little Skidbladnir better, then great.

"*Meow.* Hey, what's this little thing's name?" Kuroka asked while watching the miniature airship buzz around me.

Ah! I was glad she asked!

“Ryuuteimaru—the Dragon Emperor Ship! And check this out!”

I pointed to the tiny airship’s flag, which bore its name. “Yep, I wrote it myself, with a brush and everything! Pretty neat, huh?”

“Lame,” Kuroka stated flatly.

Damn her! It took me forever to come up with that! No, it was Ryuuteimaru! It was final! You should always trust your first instincts!

Before I could protest any further, however, Asia stepped into the training room.

“Issei?”

“Ah. What’s up, Asia?”

“Rias will be heading out soon.”

“...”

I thought she wouldn’t be going for another few hours. I mean, I knew she was going tonight, but I hadn’t expected it to be this early. It was still evening.

“The weather has cleared, and the jet is ready to leave.”

*Sounds like the departure time had been moved forward.*

“I’ll be back,” I said to Kuroka and Le Fay as I left with Asia.

The other members of the Occult Research Club, along with Chairwoman Sona, were already waiting in front of the huge teleportation square in the basement to see Rias, Kiba, and Azazel off.

To reach the vampires—the Vladi family—they would make the jump by teleportation array from Japan to Europe. There, a chartered private jet waited for their next leg of the journey.

Vampires use barriers and wards to keep outsiders away, meaning one can only enter their realm via traditional transportation.

Rias and Kiba would jump to Romania, then switch to a small plane, and then a car, which would take them into the mountains.

Vampire society had to be based in the middle of nowhere, hidden away from human civilization.

Conditions had cleared earlier than anticipated, and bad weather was expected to roll in later, so Rias and Kiba were going to set out as soon as possible.

Unlike teleportation circles, which allowed for instant travel, aircraft had to contend with the elements, and we had to adjust our plans to work with that.

Rias, Kiba, and Azazel stood in the center of the array, luggage in hand. Rias and Kiba would go directly to the Vladi family, while Azazel was off to meet the Carmilla bloc first before reuniting with Rias and Kiba.

"I'll protect you, so don't worry about a thing," Rias said. She wrapped her arms around Gasper. "I'll handle everything with the Vladi family."

"Thank you, President..." Gasper answered weakly.

Ah, Rias was letting her maternal instincts shine!

Turning to Akeno she said "I'll leave everything here to you."

"Understood, Rias."

I bumped fists with Kiba. "Look out for Rias for me, got that?"

"Of course."

With Kiba to watch Rias's back, there was nothing to worry about. Even if they did get caught up in trouble, he'd keep her safe.

Meanwhile, Azazel exchanged farewells with Sona and Rossweisse. "I'm off! You're in charge of the school, Chairwoman Sona, Ms. Rossweisse!"

""Hurry back. There's a lot of work to do.""

"Ngh. What's with that cold reaction?" Azazel seemed dissatisfied by their indifferent response.

With the end of the academic year approaching, things at school were probably getting quite hectic. It might have been for diplomatic reasons, but they didn't seem entirely happy he had found an excuse to shirk his administrative and educational responsibilities.

After all, this was the former governor of the fallen angels. It was all but guaranteed he would use this trip to have a little fun...

Azazel faced the rest of us. "That stuff with the Phenexes, those mages going after them... It doesn't sit right with me. Stay sharp."

""""""""Yes!"""""""" We answered as one.

Yep, we would be careful!

"Asia," Azazel called. "I'm leaving that other thing up to you. Listen to Ophis. And Ophis... Well, you're the Dragon God, so I'm sure you'll manage. We're counting on your blessing."

"It's a little embarrassing, but I'll do my best," Asia answered.

"I will look out for Asia," Ophis added.

*Huh? Say what?* Asia's face had turned bright red. What on earth were they talking about?

After that, Rias, Kiba, and Azazel bid their final goodbyes and prepared to leave. Eventually, it was just Rias and me, watching each other.

She took a step toward me. "...I'm heading out,"

"Yeah. I'll be waiting to hear from you. If anything happens, I'll come running."

"I know."

We gazed into each other's eyes and held hands for a few seconds, neither of us wanting to break it off.

We quickly laughed it off and let go. No matter where we went, our feelings would always connect us.

Rias, Kiba, and Azazel stood in the middle of the teleportation circle as it glowed brightly.

Once Akeno checked the glyphs a final time, the light from the array flooded the room.

Rias and the others were gone. They had made the jump.

*Rias, Kiba, Azazel. Good luck. The rest of us will hold down the fort in meantime!*

“Ugh, I’m so lonely!”

Despite my earlier sleeping troubles, it was painful seeing my bed without Rias in it!

It was bedtime, and here I was unable to bear the isolation!

We had only seen them off a few hours ago, and I was already craving her warmth!

All this time, Rias, Asia, and I had been sharing the same bed, all three of us! And now, without her here!

“Rias... I miss your breasts...”

Burying my face in those voluptuous breasts was a healing comfort! She always accepted me gladly and fell asleep with her arms wrapped around my head!

*Ah, Rias’s breasts! Her gorgeous chest!*

I found myself hugging Asia in my sorrow.

“Do you mind if we sleep like this tonight, Asia?” I asked.

“Of course not. You do like to be pampered, Issei.”

I would be okay. I still had Asia with me, which meant I could endure. I always spoiled Asia, but maybe it was okay for me to fawn on her every once in a while? I wouldn’t be able to sleep, otherwise! I was such a softy! But...I just couldn’t help it!

After growing accustomed to drifting off alongside Rias and Asia, I couldn’t go back to sleeping alone!

Just before I nodded off with Asia in my arms, a knock ripped me back to the waking world.

We both sat up to see...

“Oh-ho-ho. I’ll be staying here for a few nights.”

...Akeno in a see-through negligee!

“A-Akeno! Wh-what are you doing?!” I demanded.

“I’m here to fill in for Rias.”

*Fill in for Rias?! Did that mean she would be sleeping with Asia and me?!*

She sauntered over to the bed. “Let’s begin,” she said, letting her negligee slip to the floor.

*Huuuhhh?!*

“I-it’s my first time, so p-please be gentle... I’m a little embarrassed doing it front of Asia, so if you could turn off the lights...” Akeno was stark naked! She was even blushing! What was going on here?! What exactly was she expecting to happen?!

“H-hold on, Akeno! Wh-where did this come from?!” I cried out in a fluster.

“Hmm?” She tilted her head to one side. “I thought I was supposed to fill in for Rias while she’s away...”

There had clearly been a huge misunderstanding!

Asia was likewise taken aback by this behavior. “Ahhhhh! Akeno! Wh-what were you going to do?!”

“Come on, Asia. When a man and a woman sleep together...it can mean only one thing, right?”

I knew it! She thought sleeping together meant *that*! I mean, she wasn’t wrong...but that’s not what we did!

“Y-you’ve misunderstood! I mean, I guess that *is* the obvious conclusion, but we really do just sleep next to each other!”

Akeno suddenly looked very confused. H-had she really meant to go through with it?!

“Oh dear. And I’d made all the necessary arrangements for a memorable first night... I was looking forward to it.”

“F-first night...?”



Wh-what a wonderful phrase! Those words resonated instantly in my mind and body...!

Her words had taken a hold over me, leaving me unable to stop her from getting into the bed completely naked!

An exquisite specimen of the female form lay before my very eyes! H-her breasts were bouncing up and down, swaying left and right so close I could touch them! My eyes were glued to their every movement!

She spread her arms in welcome on the bed. "In that case, shall we sleep normally?" she asked becomingly.

Sleep normally? She was planning a whole lot more than that! I mean, she seemed far too excited!

Was this a challenge?! Did she mean to take the initiative in Rias's absence while Asia watched?! Wasn't this cheating?! I'd confessed to Rias, but now I was being drawn to Akeno!

With a bewitching grin, she took my hand in her own and guided it to her chest! Her delectably soft breasts were like a magnet to my fingers!

Ah, this was it! Akeno's breasts! They felt different than Rias's, but they were still a potent stimulant on my brain!

Without warning, Akeno stared into my eyes with a fragile look. "When I thought you were dead, it felt like my life was over... My mind went blank... All I could think about was you, like I was running from reality..."

Kiba had told me what happened. It sounded like Akeno had fallen into a really bad place, one worse than Rias. If her father, Baraqiel, hadn't rushed over, she might not have been able to pull through.

To think my death had caused her so much pain and sorrow...

I was glad to hear she felt so strongly, but at the same time, I didn't want to put her through that again.

After the incident, Azazel had given me some advice. *"Deep down, beneath that big-sister act she always puts on, Akeno is extremely dependent on the men around her. First her father, Baraqiel, now you. If anything happens to either of*

*you, she'll hit rock bottom. On the flip side, you've got the power to really bolster her spirits. All you've gotta do is show a little initiative. Like this..."*

If I remembered correctly...

"A-Akeno."

"Y-yes?"

It seemed she hadn't been expecting me to call out her name.

Could I afford to say this? I was a little hesitant... However, there was nothing for it but to trust Azazel's guidance.

"...I-I'm not going to die... No matter what, I'll always come back to you... Come back to everyone. Trust in me, in Rias, and keep living for my sake, okay?"

There! I said it! I was sweating bullets, but I'd worked up the courage to get the words out!

What came next wasn't Azazel's advice, they were my own words! I needed to let her know my feelings! I pulled my hand from her breast and rested it on her shoulder. Then, after taking a long, deep breath, I said "Let's get stronger together. Let's keep on pushing forward with the others!"

We belonged to the same Familia, and Akeno was my dear upperclasswoman. I loved her! If she was struggling, then we'd overcome her difficulties together! I was still weak, too, so I hoped we'd grow stronger together while living under the same roof!

What would her answer be?!

I didn't have to wait long to find out. Tears ran down her face.

"...Yes. I'll be all right. I'll live for you, Issei. And for Rias and the others. I'll be strong with you. And we'll be together forever."

She nodded! The way her daring demeanor crumbled, the way her voice lost its strength—this was a typical teenage girl's reaction! Sh-she was so cute. Honestly, it was nearly lethal!

The rest of Azazel's advice suddenly came back to me. *"But once you say that, you'd better be ready to go the full mile. You'll be responsible for her till the very*

*end. She's delicate and prone to melancholy, so she'll hold tight to that promise for as long as she lives. If you do kick the bucket down the road, she really will fall apart. So don't die, you got that? It would be a disaster. But so long as you keep on kicking, she'll grow stronger than she's ever been."*

What a heavy responsibility! I couldn't afford to put myself in harm's way! If I died again, it would destroy her...!

I may have just tied the noose around my own neck...but it was my only choice! There was no turning back now!

Akeno wiped away her tears, regaining her usual calm demeanor. "Yes. In that case, Issei, I'll entrust everything to you, my body included."

E-entrust *her body* to me?! She let me fondle her breasts while Rias was away, and now she was offering her whole self?! C-could this really be happening?! It was!

Wh-what was I supposed to do?!

The demon inside me was saying, *Go for it! Take Asia, too, while you're at it!* Ugh, I was torn!

While I debated my actions, the door swung open once more.

"...Hello." In came Koneko, wearing only a white button-down shirt!

"Koneko? Wh-what's up?"

"I'll sleep with you all." With those words, she cuddled up to me and caught me in an embrace.

"Now that Ravel has stolen my position on your lap, I'll defend your arms at all costs."

Oh dear! She really meant it!

How could everyone be so bold while our master was away...?! Not that I was in a position to complain!

"Only you? That's not fair!" Now Asia was hugging me from behind!

"*Meow.*" Just as Koneko's sweet, affectionate voice seized control of my brain, two more visitors made an entrance.

“And I was hoping to seize the moment before the prez gets back...”

“X-Xenovia dragged me here! Th-the Lord would never forgive sneaking into a boy’s room at night!”

“Wake up, Irina! This is our chance! We could never do this with the president around!”

Xenovia and Irina, both in their pajamas! For whatever reason, they were striking weird poses! Why were they acting like cartoon superheroes?! Were they trying to get a laugh or something?

Why was everyone trying to take advantage of Rias’s absence?!

They did act this way even on normal days, but even so, they were being awfully aggressive!

At this rate, I would be swept away by the flow! Without my King, without Rias, I was afraid we might all end up running amok!

My best bet was to keep the conversation going.

*Ah, right.* There was something that had been gnawing at me. How could the angelic Irina, who risked a literal fall from grace at the slightest transgression, talk so openly about wanting to have a baby with me?

“I’ve been wondering this for a while, but how do angels have children without falling from heaven? They *do* have kids, right? Are there any half-angels?”

Yes, if a child could be born between a fallen angel and a human, surely the same applied to regular angels and humans? And if the parent didn’t fall from heaven, wouldn’t the child be half angel?

Yet, from what I’d seen, each time Irina or another angel risked being consumed by carnal desire, they flickered on the verge of falling from heaven’s grace.

Xenovia and Irina exchanged a brief look.

“Ah. There aren’t very many of them, but half-angels do exist,” Xenovia said. The next moment, she began to remove her pajama top!

“Yep, I’ve met a few,” Irina added, already busy stripping down.

“But there have to be restrictions or something, right?” Xenovia asked, moving to her pajama pants next!

“Yep,” Irina answered as she finished undressing. “Preparation is key, and it requires a *lot* of it. You need to place a ward over the location, purify yourself, pray properly the night before, and you can’t have any wicked or negative emotions. You need to approach the act with unwavering faith and a mindset like that of a saint. If you let yourself be driven by desire, it’s all over. And most of all, it has to be unconditional love!”

That all sounded impossible for me! If I had the chance to sleep with a beautiful angel, I was sure I would be consumed by lust. And if I was an angel, the idea of making babies with an adorable human girl would no doubt precipitate my fall from grace, just as it had Azazel. Yes, I could say that with utmost confidence!

By now, the two of them were down to their underwear! What kind of situation were they trying to create?! They kept talking like it was nothing!

I appreciated their affection, but there was no way I could handle all five of them at the same time!

“I don’t really see how you can make a baby without sexual desire, let alone how you’re supposed to act like a saint while doing it... It seems impossible,” I mumbled as I wiped my nosebleed.

Xenovia nodded. “That’s why only a chosen few can commune with angels. The angel also has to make sure they’re not driven by lust. If they give in to their desire, they’ll fall, plain and simple.”

Lovemaking, for angels, sounded like a ridiculously difficult task. I certainly wouldn’t be able to handle it. The moment I saw boobs, I would be instantly aroused. Thank goodness I’d been reborn as a demon!

No wonder Irina was struggling. Every time she came across some vaguely intimate scene, she found herself on the verge of a moral crisis... And yet this angel had stripped down to her underwear!

“So it’s a no go for you then, Irina?” Xenovia asked, as if reading my mind.

Irina pursed her lips. “W-we’re childhood friends, so I’m sure we can overcome this challenge together!”

“Ah, right. I forgot you two used to know each other.”

“Geez, Xenovia! You’re testing my limits here!”

“Why are you so interested in Issei in the first place? Me, I’ve known since the peace talks between the three great powers, that, deep in my heart, he’s the one I want. He personally intervened with Archangel Michael for me! Could an ordinary guy do that?”

“I—I...!” Irina stammered.

“You’re just going with the flow, aren’t you?” Xenovia pressed. “Following along with everyone else, right?”

“N-no! I like him because he’s cool!”

“Your motives are weak! From where I’m standing, it looks like you simply developed feelings for your friend’s partner!”

“I remembered something recently! When we were little, Issei made a promise with me!”

*Huh? Did I?*

“Anyway, Irina, I need you to use your light powers! I’m going to start by showing Issei my right breast, then move onto the left one!”

“Xenovia, you meanie! I’m not a light bulb! This isn’t like that time on the school trip!”

*Ah, here we go again...*

“Oh-ho. *I’m* a demon and a fallen angel, so you don’t need to worry about me.”

*Akeno! Don’t grab my hand and place it on your breast again! I’m already at my limit!*

“Koneko! I *knew* you would be here!” Ravel had arrived, storming toward us! “Excuse me!” she said, plopping herself down on a corner of the bed.

*Hey, hey, hey! Ravel?!*

“...I’m setting up shop here in the corner! Because I’m Issei’s manager! I’ll protect him from any feline intruders!” Ravel threatened, puffing out her cheeks.

Sparks all but flew from Koneko’s eyes in turn. Uh-oh! These two were always fighting, but that only made them all the cuter!

“Bird girl.”

“What now, you thieving cat?”

How could anyone think about making babies or having raunchy fun in this situation? The room had descended into utter chaos!

“Issei! I was feeling lonelyyy!”

The last person to step into my room, tears streaming from his eyes, was Gasper! And he was carrying a folded-up cardboard box under his arm! He and Kiba lived together, and with Kiba gone, Gasper was all alone!

“As you can see, we’re already full! But you can sleep in a corner of the room if you want!” I called back.

Gasper claimed his spot and started unpacking his cardboard box right away. Yep, our shut-in vampire could sleep anywhere so long as he had one of those!

Reading the room, Akeno pulled my hand away from her chest. Ah, what a waste!

“Oh dear. It looks like you have a full house, Issei. I suppose any more flirting will be impossible for the time being.”

Yeah... Unfortunately, I got the feeling this arrangement would last longer than just this one night...

At that moment, the closet door slammed open, and Ophis made her grand entrance.

“I emerge from the closet. Heh-heh.”

She sounded so sure of herself! How long had she been there?!

*Welp. That makes all of us.*

At least we could sleep together peacefully.

Several days had passed since Rias's departure, and life at Kuou Academy was much the same as usual.

We'd received word that Rias, Kiba, and Azazel had arrived safely in Romania and were enroute to their respective destinations.

Most vampires resided in remote, difficult to reach territories, and according to everyone's regular updates, it would take them a considerable amount of time to get there.

All we could do was trust them and wait for good news.

"Why the serious face?" Matsuda asked, poking me on the head.

It was almost time for our PE class, and I'd already changed into my gym clothes, waiting for the others to finish so we could make our way to the athletic field as a group.

It was winter, making it extremely uncomfortable to exercise outside. Then again, I hated PE class in the heat of summer, too!

"You've been dominating everyone in PE lately, Issei. It's fine when you're on our team, but it sucks having to play against you," Motohama said with a sigh.

Sorry, guys. My physical fitness had improved considerably ever since becoming a demon, thanks to my training and the constant battles with tough opponents. Still, I was holding back here. If I didn't, it would be clear to everyone I wasn't at a human level.

On top of that, my new dragon body sometimes had my power level going out of control, leaving everyone else in shock and bewilderment... Essentially, I was now a humanoid dragon, and I wasn't used to suppressing my power yet.

Back when I was first reincarnated as a demon, I had been amazed and delighted by my superhuman abilities. Now, realizing that I was so different from the likes of Matsuda and Motohama, I had mixed feelings.

How long would we be able to stay friends? I didn't want to lose them, that was for sure.

Demons were long-lived, and could actively control their outward



appearances. When the two of them started getting on in years, would I, still youthful in my demon life, have to present myself to them as an old man? I could see our relationship getting more and more difficult as the years went on.

W-well, there was no use worrying about that now. I had to focus on PE class.

Right as we reached the athletic ground, Matsuda spoke up. “Hey, do you remember Taoka? From back in junior high?”

“Ah. The weirdo obsessed with girls’ body hair?” I answered.

I remembered him, always going on and on about body hair. He liked seeing the leftover stubble after shaving. I...didn’t quite get it. Maybe it’s because I was too young.

“His older brother is starting up his own shop,” Matsuda continued. “And you know what? His lady business partner is the manager from his old school club.”

“Oh-ho. So they’re *business* partners? Sounds like they might be more than that, huh?” Motohama muttered with a lecherous expression.

Honestly, the same thought had occurred to me.

“Who knows?” Matsuda replied with a shrug. “She’s been supporting him since they were at school. I heard he talked her into it, promised to become independent, and asked her to join him. She’s definitely a good manager. I think some other people wanted her for their own businesses, but she went with Taoka’s brother because they’re close, and she trusts him.”

“Opening a store with an old friend from school? It does sound passionate.”

That reminded me of how Ravel supported me going independent as a demon one day.

Setting out by myself. I’d need friends, and a manager was a must.

“Right?” Matsuda nodded. “Making promises about the future... Sure sounds neat. I’d better get myself a manager, eh?”

I already had one—Ravel, still helping me sort through my pile of mage applicants.

Should I make a promise with her? That when I become a high-class demon, I

would take her with me to continue as my manager?

That idea didn't sound half bad. Not bad at all.

"Yeah. A girl manager would be best," I added.

"Of course!"

"Absolutely!"

My two negative influences were in complete agreement. Unsurprisingly.

Making a promise about the future with a capable manager... To do that, you needed ambition, ability, and above all, confidence.

You'd be taking responsibility for another person's life... If you weren't careful, you could end up ruining it. It was tough to think of anything more awful.

To think, there was a girl I wanted to work with to realize my dreams... Man, I was lucky.

I would have to take working with Ravel more seriously. She was so reliable, so reassuring, always deftly filling in for my own shortcomings. I hoped she would remain my manager forever.

"Hey, look. Are those cosplayers over there?" Matsuda said, pointing.

"Ohhh," Motohama narrowed his eyes as he peered. "What are they supposed to be? Wizards?"

I spun around.

"..."

Deep in my heart, I'd always believed my everyday life to be safe. My family home was free from danger and Kuou Academy would forever remain a regular school.

I thought all that supernatural stuff was kind of separate from my regular days.

That all fell apart when I saw several figures dressed in mage robes raising their hands in my direction. Magic circles formed beneath their feet!

They swept back their hoods, revealing themselves to be three foreign men!

There was no doubting it. It was an attack.

“Matsuda! Motohama! Run!”

My friends responded with dubious looks.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“You don’t look too good, Issei. Do those cosplayers have beef with you?”

I shouldn’t have been surprised that they didn’t understand. This was no joke! The mages were about to loose a barrage of magic out here in the open!

Everyone was going to be caught in the attack!

I took off at a sprint, hoping to draw the magic away.

“Matsuda! Motohama! Get out of here! Hide behind a building or something! Go!” I shouted while I ran.

Fortunately, the mages quickly chased after me, their target.

I could hear Matsuda and Motohama yelling something behind me...but this was no time for talk! I had to distract the mages before my friends got caught in the crossfire!

Those two had nothing to do with anything supernatural! Not with magic, not with the Khaos Brigade! They *couldn’t* have anything to do with them!

“Defending your friends, are you, Red Dragon Emperor?”

“Hah! The report was right! You’re as naive as they come!”

“Still, the council gave him a triple-A ranking! He’s the real deal!”

What were they all blabbering on about?!

Council? Did they mean the Council of Mages, Mephisto Pheles’s organization? I’d only met that guy once, but he seemed friendly. I couldn’t picture him sending a bunch of belligerent mages to a human school!

—!

So they had to be stray mages. Wayward, reckless magic users, not recognized by the council, who engaged in all sorts of destructive behavior.

But what were they doing at Kuou Academy in broad daylight?! This area was under the protection of the three great powers! Heck, there was supposed to be a barrier in place to stop bad guys from just causally strolling in! Visitors needed to be vetted and receive formal permission!

There was no way these guys would have been given the go-ahead!

Thankfully, I managed to lure the stray mages into the deserted grove on the edge of the school grounds, and it was there I decided to confront them.

They activated their magic squares once again, shrouding themselves in dense auras.

Fortunately, there wasn't anyone else around, so I could afford to let loose a bit!

"Boosted Gear!"

My red gauntlet materialized on my left hand, but that was all. The jewel wasn't emitting any light!

*Uh-oh...*

Apparently, I'd activated it during Ddraig's downtime. My gauntlet would only be good for defense!

The mages watched cautiously as my abilities failed to activate.

"Isn't he going to invoke his Sacred Gear?"

"Maybe it isn't working?"

"Hey you, Red Dragon Emperor! We wanted to challenge you at your full strength!"

*Huh? They came all this way for a fair fight?*

"What do you want?" I demanded.

The three men chortled in amusement.

"Director Mephisto, the guy who kicked us out, he's ranked you demon youths from best to worst."

Right, I already knew that part. Rias and the other Kings had been labeled the

“Rookies Four,” and I’d been given a fairly high rating in recognition of my contributions to the fight against the Khaos Brigade.

Then again, I clearly wasn’t the most popular. Most applicants wanting to make a pact with me were more interested in my potential for magical research than my achievements on the battlefield.

“We thought we’d take a break from the mission to see what you’re worth,” one of the mages declared with a fearless grin.

*Mission? What mission?*

An explosion sounded in the distance. It came from the new school building! The blast was powerful enough to send a tremor through the ground! Had the school been hit by a large-scale magical attack?!

Was there anyone to repel these guys?! My class was outside for PE. The boys were at the athletic field, while the girls were in the gymnasium! If anyone was going to stop that second attack, it’d have to be Akeno and Rossweisse, plus the student council, of course.

—!

A realization struck me abruptly.

The first-year classroom. Koneko, Gasper, Ravel.

Stray mages targeting the House of Phenex... It couldn’t be...

“You’re after Ravel!” I exclaimed, panicked.

The three mages laughed.

“Heh. You worked it out.”

“You’re stuck here with us for now, so let’s play.”

They formed another magic array before unleashing a powerful fireball.

I jumped backward to dodge, then rushed forward to counter!

“I’m not messing around!”

I promoted to a Queen before launching my own attack at the first of the mages! I didn’t need my Sacred Gear to beat the living daylights out of these

jerks with my bare hands!

A defensive spell formed to block my strike, the impact echoing through my fist. *Dammit!* Ordinary punches couldn't break through these defenses! If I could just get a hit in, this fight would be over!

"You've left yourself open!"

A volley of icicles sprayed toward me from the side.

I raised my gauntlet to block them...but it was no good! There were too many! Icy shards struck me all over, sending pain coursing through my body!

My injuries didn't matter, though! These people were after Ravel! I couldn't just stand here and let them have her!

I concentrated my energy in my right fist. No, not for an aura-infused punch.

Slowly, my right arm began to swell, tearing through my gym jacket. It had become dragonified.

My new body could partially transform into a dragon with enough focus.

I preferred not to use this ability, as I tended to lose control and it left me exhausted afterward. Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice since I couldn't use my Sacred Gear.

Once dragonified, my physical abilities skyrocketed, and while I couldn't transform my entire body, I *could* change isolated parts, like an arm or a leg!

Readying my newly dragonified arm, I feinted to the right, then lashed out at the nearest mage.

My target formed another magic array to defend himself, but...

*Crunch!*

...my strike tore straight through, instantly shattering the mage's shield!

*All right! Now we're talking!*

My dragon fist slammed hard into the mage's face!

"Gah!"

The man went flying backward, crashing into a nearby tree and collapsing to

the ground.

More explosions sounded from the school building... I needed to get over there and help!

“Heh. Good one. I wasn’t expecting you to employ a dragon arm,” muttered one of the remaining two mages.

“I’m just getting started.”

Ugh! I didn’t have time to deal with these guys!

Just as I was about to lunge for them, small magic circles opened near their ears.

Was it a kind of communication magic? After a short moment, the two relaxed their postures, their lips curling in sinister grins.

One of the remaining mages grabbed their fallen comrade as they formed a teleportation array beneath their feet.

They were escaping!

“Wait!”

I moved to stop them.

“We’ll play again!” one of them declared as they vanished in a burst of light.

I did my best to hide by transformed arm in my torn jacket while running for the school building. Akeno would have to drain the dragon energy later. For now, I’d just have to hope no regular students saw.

Several parts of the building were badly damaged. The windows were all blown out, and craters dotted the grounds. I had a bad feeling about this!

I hurried to the first-year classrooms—to Koneko and the others.

The hallway was badly damaged, the window-side wall had a huge hole blown in it.

A girl from Koneko’s class was slumped on the ground in the corridor. A few others stood terrified farther down the hallway.

I rushed up to the girl on the floor.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She looked shell-shocked, her body tense as she stared back at me in a daze.

My voice didn’t reach her... The mage attack had left her stunned to the core.

I shook her shoulder while glancing into the nearest classroom. No response and no sign of Koneko, Gasper, or Ravel. Had they escaped? I hoped so, but I doubted it... They wouldn’t abandon a friend. They would’ve done everything in their power to protect her.

The first-year girl mumbled, “Those strange people grabbed me... Koneko, Gasper, and Ravel came to help, but...”

Those good-for-nothing mages had used her as a hostage!

“They all disappeared in a flash of light with those cosplaying wizards! It happened so fast!” another student farther down the corridor told me.

They’d *all* been captured?!

Despairing, I slammed my fist on the floor.

*Dammit. So much for protecting them! Rias was counting on me, and I failed Ravel!*

I clenched my teeth in frustration.

Not long after, the student council and the rest of the Gremory Familia came rushing over. Apart from our three missing first-years, everyone else was safe.

What on earth were those stray mages planning to do with them?!



## Life.4

### Go, Occult Research Club & Student Council!

That evening, we in the Occult Research Club met with the student council in the old school building. The student council's Bishop, Kusaka, was in a separate room, relaying what had happened to the alliance.

"We will handle repairs to the damaged areas throughout the school," Vice-Chairwoman Shinra stated. "All students have been sent home. As for the assailants, we have been told specialists from each of the three great powers are currently working to track them down."

The chairwoman took over from there. "The memory-wiping device Azazel left behind in case of emergency has certainly proved its worth. We've met with all students who witnessed the mage attack and adjusted their memories, so they now believe the school was closed because of a suspicious intruder."

Was that the same device Azazel had used after my three hundred doppelgangers ran amok on campus? It wouldn't do for everyone to think I was responsible for that chaos, so the school had effectively taken it on loan from the fallen angels to smooth matters over.

Fallen angel technology was incredible. The power to erase specific memories whenever a regular person got caught up in some supernatural event was handy. It's why Matsuda and Motohama had no recollection of Yuuma Amano—the fallen angel Raynare.

However, if too many memories were altered, it could lead to all sorts of mental continuity issues. That's definitely why the student council had gone with the intruder story, to keep the pretense somewhat close to fact.

"What about all the physical damage, though?" Xenovia asked.

"We've adjusted students' memories on that point, too. The story is that scheduled repairs just so happened to coincide with the intruder alert... It's a

good thing no one fled the school grounds. Though it seems we'll need more fallen angel support to deal with any video recordings students might have taken on their cellphones."

In short, the presence of supernatural beings and the truth of the academy would remain safe.

Shinra didn't look too pleased, though. "We can't completely undo what happened or remove the emotional shock students suffered. The feeling they met with something terrifying will stick with them forever... And they'll live their lives without ever realizing what it was... I'll never forgive those mages for that!"

The girl who'd been taken hostage...

Her memories of the mages were gone, but the trauma from the attack would remain engraved on her heart. Would she spend her life unable to pinpoint the source of that pain?

It was all because of those stray mages... But were we partly to blame, as well?

We'd failed to stop them. And this school was...

Saji placed a hand on my shoulder, shaking his head. "Hyoudou. You're worried that the school being a hotbed for supernatural stuff is partly to blame, right? I know how you feel, but I'm more worried about Koneko Toujou and the others. We need to focus on rescuing them."

"You're right."

Rescuing our three kidnapped juniors had to be our top priority... But tanking the shock proved tough. I always thought Kuou Academy was a safe space, at least during the day. Sure, Kokabiel's attack had turned it into a battlefield once, but I never imagined terrorists would be bold enough to strike during school hours.

Had I made the slightest mistake, Matsuda or Motohama might have died. This served as a painful reminder that so long as they were involved with demons, their lives were constantly in peril. That was why I had come to question Kuou Academy's place in the human world...

Incidentally, I'd tried calling Kuroka and Le Fay. They were supposed to be at home, yet I couldn't get through to them. I had a duty to tell them what happened to Koneko. However, when I created a communication circle, Ophis, our little Dragon God, answered.

"Vali called them away," she'd explained.

Those partial live-in girls were never around when we needed them!

Vali summoned them, huh? Had something happened? We'd been attacked, so maybe the same had happened to his group. I sure hoped not... This wasn't the time to worry about him, though!

"Are we dealing with the Khaos Brigade here?" Xenovia asked from beside me. "Those stray mages had to be the same ones who've been targeting the Phenexes, right?"

"They must be," Irina answered.

*Yep.* I'd all but concluded as much myself.

"What do you think, Rossweisse?" I asked, hoping to hear the opinion of our resident mage.

"I analyzed the residual magic, and—" Before Rossweisse could finish, her cellphone began to ring.

*"Ahem.* Excuse me. Hello...?"

Who could it be?

"G-Granny?! What happened? Somethin' goin' on?"

"*G-Granny?*" Was it me, or did Rossweisse's accent change...? No, it wasn't just my imagination. She was speaking in a dialect!

"Well, I'm in the middle of a mighty important meetin' right now. Huh? Work? Don't you worry none, I'm doin' just fine. Ain't nothin' in the world you gotta worry about, Granny."

Everyone stared in astonishment!

A cool, city-dwelling, levelheaded beauty (and hundred yen-store fanatic) had abruptly adopted a rural accent!

“Well, mah boss at mah new job is just a real nice lady, ya know? She treats me well—pays a whole lot more than the last guy did! That’s why I’m able to send ya all that money. Ain’t nothin’ much in the countryside, right? So if ya buy somethin’ to keep yourself warm, that’s enough for me.”

Asia leaned close to whisper in my ear. “I heard recently that Rossweisse has been sending her savings back to her hometown...”

“Apparently, she’s from some boring country place,” Xenovia added quietly. “Her grandmother lives alone, and Rossweisse supports her with money from her demon work.”

Even Irina wanted to get a word in. “She told me her parents are warriors serving the Norse gods, and they don’t come home very often, so she was raised by her grandmother. She really loves her. Her dream is to build a discount store with everything you could ever need right there in the countryside.”

*Seriously?* This was the first I’d heard about any of that. Rossweisse had never mentioned being from the country, or her grandmother, or sending money home. No wonder she was so obsessed with finding the best deals!

A discount store in the countryside... That explained her love of hundred-yen shops.

“So, that’s her dream,” I muttered, feeling a new sense of kinship with the former Valkyrie.

Damn that old sleazebag, Odin! How could he abandon such a kindhearted, good-natured woman?! Admittedly, I understood why he found Rossweisse insufferable occasionally. She could be a little fussy now and then, but she was a good person!

After ending the call, Rossweisse cleared her throat again. “Sorry about that. I wasn’t expecting a call from home... My grandmother is a magic user, too, so I asked her about any spells strong enough to break through Kuou Academy’s strong security. She had a rather harsh theory about the situation. I’d considered the possibility myself, but...”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“A traitor,” Chairwoman Sona answered for her.

The rest of us turned to her in alarm.

We’d been betrayed?

“This entire area is under the jurisdiction of the alliance between the three great powers, from whom various officials cooperate to maintain the peace. Together, they maintain a powerful barrier over the town. Any intrusions should be quickly detected. Infiltration and escape are difficult, but not impossible. Forced entry is possible for those of sufficient strength. However, we’d be alerted immediately, so we’re dealing with something else this time.”

Right. Had someone stormed in, we all would’ve known.

“Alternatively,” the chairwoman continued. “A resident or alliance member living in the town may have been taken captive while traveling outside the barrier, then later manipulated to provide entry for the assailants. Thus far, there is no indication that any residents, students, or staff members have been used in such a way. As such, we can conclude that a traitor intermediary must have facilitated the mages’ infiltration.”

“How is that possible?” I questioned.

Chairwoman Sona arched an eyebrow, disturbed by her own conclusion. “Only core members of those stationed here could disrupt the barrier undetected. In other words, the Gremory Familia, Irina, Ravel, my own Familia, and Azazel. No one else would be able to orchestrate such a bold attack.”

“You’re saying one of us did it?!” Saji demanded.

His disbelief was as clear as day. I couldn’t accept it, either. To think that there was a turncoat among our friends and allies, the very people we’d faced countless life or death situations with...

“I can’t believe any of us would be a traitor,” the chairwoman answered gently. “But whoever is behind this, we can’t afford to let our guard down. We don’t even know whether Ravel Phenex was their real target, though it would be naive to discount the possibility. As for those spirited away—”

“Chairwoman!” the Bishop Kusaka interrupted, rushing into the room.

“We’ve received word from the Occult Research Club’s abducted first-years!”

-○○●○-

Late that night, the members of the Occult Research Club and the student council waited at the local train station.

Why? Because the mages who’d attacked the school had told us to come here.

*“If you want Koneko Toujou, Gasper Vladi, and Ravel Phenex back in one piece, come to the underground train platform. Bring only the Gremory Familia, the angel Irina, and the Sitri Familia.”*

They wanted all of us for some reason.

So we stood by at the underground train platform, the hidden one at the station that connected to the underworld. We’d used it during summer vacation on our first legitimate visit to the underworld.

Rias had said there were several places in town built specifically to accommodate demons... And those stray mages had the audacity to use one for themselves.

“I wouldn’t have expected them to want to meet here,” the chairwoman muttered in front of the elevator. “Officials have already looked into the other underground demon areas throughout town, and they found traces of magic at each. Mages must have been hiding in them.”

“Are you saying they tunneled through the ground? Or that they snuck in through the underworld, following the train line...?” I asked. “They would’ve had to go through the dimensional rift...”

The chairwoman shook her head. “No, I suspect it wasn’t either of those. Maybe someone let them in unawares? I don’t want to think anyone willingly betrayed us...,” she said with a stern look.

Well, if they had entered through the underworld, that would imply that the House of Gremory had let them in, which would only complicate things even further.

Once we were all in front of the elevator, the chairwoman glanced around at each of us. “Staff from heaven and the underworld have this train station

surrounded. They've also sealed the passage into the Gremory territory through the dimensional rift. We still don't know these mages' true intentions...but we're going to have to face them directly."

In other words, we were all set. All possible escape routes were sealed off, and the mages were surrounded, like rats in a trap. Then again, they may have prepared their own means of escape. However, they'd called us here, suggesting that they had more in mind than a getaway.

Anyway, our main objective was to rescue our people!

"Who's leading the Gremory group?" Xenovia asked.

The chairwoman raised her glasses. "That won't be a problem. I will be directing both the student council and the Occult Research Club. Rias gave me special permission to take command in the event of an emergency."

—!

Chairwoman Sona was taking charge! Now that was a relief!

"I suspect you aren't used to fighting without your King, but can I trust you all to follow my instructions?"

Everyone accepted without hesitation. Why wouldn't we have? We couldn't have asked for more!

The chairwoman turned to Xenovia. "How many of your seven Holy Sword abilities can you presently make use of?"

"Excalibur Destruction isn't a problem. And thanks to my training, I can use Excalibur Mimic, Transparent, and Rapid, but I haven't mastered them yet. Nightmare and Blessing aren't good matches for me, so it'll be hard to make use of them, and Ruler is even worse. I can't use that one at all."

"We're fighting underground, so our combat options will be limited. Too much destruction will bring the building down around us. We'll have to avoid overly powerful or flashy attacks... Think of this as similar to the Rating Game between our Familias. We need to refrain from excessive force and limit the damage. If necessary, I will give you specific orders."

It was just like the chairwoman said, we couldn't afford to destroy the

underground platform, which meant we would have to hold back. Indeed, just like in our Rating Game.

Next, Sona asked after each of us in turn—perhaps to develop some impromptu strategy.

But there was one thing that concerned me.

Among the Sitri Familia was a large man I'd never seen before, a foreigner with a long gray fringe covering his eyes. Despite his hair style, he had handsome features and an impressive physique similar to Sairaorg's.

"U-um, who's that man over there...?" I asked Shinra nervously.

"This gentleman recently enrolled at Kuou Academy's university. He's the Sitri Familia's new Rook."

*Their new Rook?! He's part of their group now?!*

A man of his physique was studying at the academy's university?! Wow! This was all news to me!

"...Call me Loup Garou," he said quietly.

Talk about a succinct, no-nonsense response!

"His nickname is Rugal, so you can use that for short, Hyoudou. We'll leave you to support the forces outside this time around, Rugal."

"...Sure."

With that curt acknowledgment, he turned and left.

I guess he'd be sticking outside. We did need someone to make sure the enemy didn't bring in reinforcements.

"Master. Preparations around the perimeter are complete."

An unfamiliar voice! All members of the Gremory Familia looked around, trying to find where it had come from. We found the source on the ceiling.

A magic circle with the Sitri crest had appeared on the station building ceiling. A head popped out of it, hanging upside down!

It was a small-bodied person dressed like a grim reaper and wearing a skull



mask!

“G-grim reaper!” I shouted, pointing overhead.

The chairwoman followed my gaze. “Oh. That’s my new Knight.”

“I’m Bennia... A former grim reaper.”

That petite grim reaper dropped down from the ceiling, landing gracefully before us!

A moment later, she removed her mask, revealing the cute face of a sleepy, golden-eyed, middle school-aged girl with deep purple hair!

Not only that, but her scythe, the trademark weapon of any grim reaper, had cute skull decorations on it!

A goth kid grim reaper?!

“A r-reaper?! And she’s a girl?!” I exclaimed in shock.

The chairwoman nodded. “Yes, Bennia is a grim reaper. More precisely, she’s a demigod: half human, half death god.”

“Her dad is Orcus, the ultimate-level grim reaper,” Saji added. “Bet you didn’t expect that, huh?”

I didn’t understand a word he was saying!

“I’d been told about your new Knight and Rook, but I wasn’t expecting a grim reaper.” Rossweisse stared in wonder at the petite girl.

Yep, I was taken for a loop as well. A grim reaper for a Knight?!

“We originally had someone else in mind for the role,” Shinra admitted, shaking her head. “Unfortunately, the plan fell through. That’s when Bennia showed up.”

“I couldn’t go along with Lord Hades’s actions anymore, so I decided to switch sides and asked to join.”

So she’d negotiated her way in?

Taking a moment, I wondered whether she might be a spy for Hades. The chairwoman seemed to sense my doubt.

"I won't deny that I had similar suspicions, but I've decided to trust her," she said.

"Wh-why?" I questioned.

At this, the petite grim reaper held out a piece of paper. "I'm a huge fan, Mr. Breast Dragon! Look, I've embroidered a picture of you onto the back of my robe, see? Can I get your autograph? Pretty please?"

*E-embroidery...? Wh-whoa, she's not kidding! That's me, fully armored!*

She was a fan?! First Le Fay, now her?!

"A fan...?" I muttered as I signed my name.

"Yep! Plus, I didn't like the way my stupid old man and Lord Hades were doing things, so I ran away from home!"

I guess even grim reapers live complicated lives. I definitely didn't expect the God of Death to have domestic issues.

"Fortunately, she only needed the one Knight piece," the chairwoman explained.

Huh. That sounded like a bargain.

"Heh-heh-heh! It's no big deal. I take after my mom. She's human."

So she said...but she seemed plenty strong, both in personality and ability.

"Bennia," the chairwoman began. "Could you join Rugal outside in case of any trouble?"

*"Got it, Master! I'll keep watch with the big guy!"*

No sooner did she finish speaking than Bennia the petite grim reaper formed a magic circle beneath her feet and slipped into the ground.

That was an interesting way to use a teleportation array. Instead of disappearing in a burst of light or flying away, she simply fell into it.

The chairwoman sighed. "I apologize for introducing my newest servants immediately before a crucial operation... These things tend to strike at the most inopportune times."

“No, it’s fine,” I replied. “Meeting them has helped me loosen up a little.”

Ever since the attack, I had been overwhelmed by the need to rescue our Familia’s younger members. Seeing those two new faces had helped to relieve my tension.

This left Sona with three unused Pawn pieces, right? If memory served, Saji had needed four, and Nimura one.

“Now then, Issei,” the chairwoman said, turning to me. “What is Ddraig’s condition?”

“Not very good, to be honest. He wakes up every now and then, but he’s asleep most of the time. He isn’t responding right now. I can activate my gauntlet, but I’m definitely not in peak form.”

I had only just partially regained some of its functionality—chiefly, my power increasing and Gift abilities. I had succeeded in activating my armor during our training sessions, but I got the feeling it wouldn’t work at the moment... My energy was still unstable, seeing how Ddraig hadn’t yet fully recovered.

“In other words, your Balance Breaker is a no go? Understood. Then we’ll operate on the assumption you can’t use your Scale Mail.”

“Sorry...”

Damn it, this was shameful. Everyone needed me, and I was completely useless. Rias had tasked me with looking out for everyone in her absence, and look what happened...

“There’s no need for you to apologize, Issei,” the chairwoman assured. “You’re the hero of the underworld. If there’s anything you can’t handle, we’ll make up for it. Besides, you’ve pushed yourself too hard recently. *We* should be the ones apologizing for placing everything on your shoulders.”

The other members of the student council nodded along in agreement.

“You can count on us, Hyoudou. Sure, we’re rivals in Rating Games, but when it comes to stuff like this, we’re brothers-in-arms, right? We want to protect the underworld and Kuou Academy, too, you know?” Saji declared with a grin.

He was a true friend.

Chairwoman Sona took my hand.

“I’ll be leading today. I know I’m not Rias, but please, trust me.”

“““““Of course!””””” we in the Gremory Familia responded as one.

Yep, we would show those rogue mages what happened when they underestimated us students of Kuou Academy!

“By the way, Issei, how many times do you think you can use your Gift ability?” the chairwoman asked.

“It depends how much I’ve powered up, but I should be able to manage two dozen transfers or so.”

The chairwoman spent a moment considering quietly. “Very well,” she said at last. “In that case, Issei...”

Once we were all filled in on the plan, we rode the elevator into the depths of the station building.

After arriving underground, we proceeded to the platform for trains bound for the underworld, passing through the large atrium with passages proceeding left and right...

It wasn’t long before we sensed a disturbing presence... The enemy was no doubt waiting for us at the end of this path.

Glancing at one another in wordless confirmation, we moved into our battle formation.

Xenovia, Irina, Saji, the Knight Meguri, and the Rook Yura would lead the charge.

The middle guard was made up of Akeno, Rossweisse, Shinra, and the Pawn Nimura.

Finally, Chairwoman Sona, Asia, and the Bishops Kusaka and Hanakai would fight from the rear.

Basically, our close-combat fighters were positioned at the front, our long-range attackers in the middle, and our support personnel kept to the back.

Rias had authorized me to promote without her being present, so I wasted no

time shifting to a Queen. Saji and Nimura likewise promoted to Queens with Sona's permission.

Once we were all in position, we switched on our communication earpieces. With these, we would be better able to coordinate across the battlefield.

Then, signaling with our eyes that we were all ready, we proceeded down the corridor into a huge underground space.

This was my first time entering this part of the station complex... It was much larger than the train platform we had visited last time, the ceiling towering high overhead. I could hardly believe it. Just what sort of facilities were buried underneath our town?

Then a band of mages appeared directly in front of us!

Each wore robes, and though varied in design, I clearly recognized more than a few of them as the ones who had attacked the school.

We kept our distance, positioning ourselves across from them.

There had to be more than a hundred! I spotted a fair number of summoned monsters, too. Just how many foes were we going up against?!

How could so many have infiltrated the town? We definitely had a huge problem on our hands.

I couldn't tell which of them were women. Were they all men? Probably... If they knew about my Boob-Lingual technique, they wouldn't risk throwing female fighters on the front lines; it threatened exposing their strategy.

Well, putting that aside, we only had one main objective.

"We came like you said," I called out, pointing their way. "Where are our first-years?"

My voice reverberated through the chamber.

The mages answered only with laughs and shrugs. Ugh, talk about disrespectful! I could have lashed out in fury, but I forced myself to remain calm. Just like Azazel had pointed out the other day, rushing in headfirst when my friends were in danger was my biggest weakness.

Finally, one of the mages stepped forward. “Well hello there, demons. It’s an honor to have two of the Rookies Four—the Gremory and Sitri Familias—come join us.”

“What are you hoping to achieve?” the chairwoman demanded. “Do you want the Phenexes? Or us?”

“Both, let’s say. Don’t fret, the Phenex girl is being treated well. Our leader expressly instructed us to show her every courtesy.”

*Leader? Who?*

“The Phenex issue is resolved, so all that’s left is to deal with you,” the mage continued. “How can we be anything but curious? That clown Mephisto and his council think very highly of you, if you haven’t noticed. You understand our interest, don’t you? Who wouldn’t want to test themselves against these much-vaunted young demons? As mages always seeking to push the limits of research, it’s only natural for us to seek you out.”

With that, the mage snapped his fingers, and his colleagues formed a wall of threatening magic circles!

“Come at us, demons! It’s time for the ultimate showdown of demon powers and magic!”

That must have been their signal! A hail of fire, water, ice, lightning, wind, light, and dark magic came hurtling toward us like a tsunami. The horde of monsters rushed in a moment later!

Amid that seemingly impossible barrage of magic attacks, the chairwoman started issuing her orders. *“Let’s show them just how strong we young demons really are... We’ll make them regret turning against Kuou Academy.”*

Xenovia was the first to leap forward!

With a broad swing of Ex-Durendal, she struck down the oncoming wave of magic with the sword’s holy aura!

From the middle guard, Rossweisse unleashed a full burst to back her up, annihilating a huge swath of the oncoming monsters!

Thanks to their combined efforts, most of the monsters and magic attacks

never reached us—*most* of them!

Just before one stray mage could reach us, the Rook Yura positioned herself in front of me and began conjuring something in her hands. A huge shield!

“Grow, shield of mine! Twinkle Aegis!” she called.

Radiant light spilling from her hands coalesced into a massive shield, so huge that it seemed to fill half the battlefield! It was like a beam shield!

The volley of magical attacks hit it head-on, but the shield stopped them all!

It sustained an incredibly powerful barrage, but from what I could tell, it was unscathed! It had to be super robust!

*“That’s one of the artificial Sacred Gears Azazel gave us,”* Chairwoman Sona explained over our earpieces. *“By making a pact with a fairy and housing it in the Sacred Gear, we were able to augment its abilities.”*

A spirit pact to upgrade the shield?! Hold on, so that was one of Azazel’s artificial Sacred Gears? Right, I did hear that the student council was making use of them!

Combined with a Rook’s innate defensive powers, it looked like it offered an insane amount of protection!

With their onslaught thwarted, the mages were in an uproar. No doubt they hadn’t expected to be so easily beaten back.

*“It’s time to take the battle to them.”*

With that command, we began our advance!

*“As I mentioned earlier, Issei, keep moving around the battlefield alongside your Skidbladnir,”* came the chairwoman’s next instruction.

Yep, that was my role in this fight. If I couldn’t use my Balance Breaker, I would help out in a different way. By transferring more power to my allies!

*“On my signal, send a power-up where I tell you.”*

“Understood!”

I summoned my magical airship Ryuuteimaru and held on while he pulled me up into the air. *Whoa!* Even with me holding on like this, the little airship still

had so much speed and power! It was a shame I couldn't fly with my demon wings in my current state, but at least I could rely on little Ryuuteimaru...!

With that, I started doubling my power!

*You had better wake up soon, Ddraig!*

*"Boost!"*

The vanguard—Xenovia, Saji, and the Knight, Tomoe Meguri—charged in. Xenovia crushed the mages in her path with an incredibly powerful blow, while Meguri was holding...an artificial Sacred Gear shaped like a Japanese katana? It was like a mix of blinding light and darkest darkness swirling together!

*"Tomoe's artificial Sacred Gear is a Japanese sword patterned after the Blaze Shining Aura Darkness Blade. Its official name is 'Blaze Shining Aura Darkness Samurai Sword,' if I'm not mistaken,"* the chairwoman relayed in a whisper.

Seriously?! So Meguri's Sacred Gear was related to Azazel's embarrassing hobby project?! After seeing its raw attack power on display, I thought it was probably able to cut through most anything, even ethereal opponents.

"Ngh! Please don't call it that, Chairwoman! But it *is* really strong!" Meguri protested, swinging the weapon of mixed light and dark to break through the mages' defensive magic.

*Why did you choose that thing, Meguri?! Because of its power level?! Well, it sure was devastating, its residual force alone carving through the floor and walls! That artificial Sacred Gear was definitely up there with the best!*

Right, wasn't it Azazel who named all those artificial Sacred Gears? He used to be the leader of the fallen angels, and he basically had the maturity of a middle schooler!

"I won't let Xenovia get the better of me!"

Next up, riding in on wings of pure white, Irina soared through the air wielding one of heaven's mass-produced Holy Demon Swords. Using the weapon's light-infused aura, she unleashed a volley of searing energy beams to push the mages back.

Then came Saji, using Vritra's Blaze Black Flare to shower his foes in cursed



flame.

“Stay where you are!”

A swath of mages was hit all at once, Vritra’s black flames closing in on them from all sides. Once Saji was in range of an opponent, they were practically done for. He’d summon up a wall of flame from their very feet, consuming them whole.

Yes, that was one of Vritra’s numerous Sacred Gears, Shadow Prison...

Those cursed flames seethed and roiled, closing off the mages’ movements, while their ever-rising heat tormented those caught in its cage. At the same time, the Delete Field Sacred Gear would chip away at their reserves of magical power.

Once snared within that trap, there was no escape. Saji’s target would be stuck until all their strength was gone.

However, he didn’t stop there. Next, he hooked the mages with a few string-thin lines!

“I’ll convert your magic into demonic energy!”

This was where Saji’s original ability came into play. He latched onto his opponents with those Black Dragon veins and slowly drained their power, even their blood...

There were already more than a dozen lines; all of that energy flowed straight to Saji!

“Dammit!”

“What’s going on?!”

The mages fought futilely to sever the lines with their magic. Those dragon veins were resilient, that was for sure. I knew firsthand how difficult they were to cut!

The black flames continued their relentless pursuit, coursing down the lines to add to the conflagration!

Once Saji has you in his clutches you were done for without a way to break

free. And there was also the fact that he could transform into the Dragon King himself...

Yep, he was getting to be one heck of a technique-type fighter!

*“Can you hear me, Issei? Transfer your power down Saji’s lines!”* came the chairwoman’s command.

This was what I had been waiting for!

“Got it!”

Holding tight to Ryuuteimaru, I soared through the air, dropping down next to Saji, ready to transfer my doubled energy where it was needed!

With that, Saji disconnected himself and threw the cables to Rossweisse, in the middle guard, directly linking her to the mages!

*“Transfer!”*

The lines pulsated violently, a flood of potent magic pouring straight into the trapped mages!

Exhausted and drained, the mages blacked out, falling hard to the ground—while at the same time, an intense aura erupted around Rossweisse!

That last combo had served to transfer the mages’ powers straight into our own magic user!

“Wh-whoa!” I exclaimed.

*“By doubling the lines’ absorption ability and connecting them to Rossweisse, we’ve taken the mages’ energy for our own...,”* the chairwoman explained. *“And seeing as we have our own magic users, we might as well make use of it.”*

No doubt about it, she had a perfect handle not only on Saji’s abilities, but mine and Rossweisse’s, too!

*“The same combination would work with Gasper, allowing him to absorb an enemy’s blood from a distance. After all, we already know that’s possible. The opponent would likely collapse from blood loss, while Gasper would power up. The only issue would be Gasper’s lung capacity... We will have to check with him when we have a chance.”*

*Whoa!* Just how much thought had she put into these strategies?! It was like she knew just what to do with us all!

“Nimura! Cover me!” Saji called out.

“On it, Genshirou!”

The first-year Pawn Ruruko Nimura gracefully slid in to support Saji, punching and kicking the nearby mages with her bare hands.

Only her legs were armored, but they were positively erupting with supercharged aura, generating incredible speed and kicking power. Was that another artificial Sacred Gear?!

Once she was close enough to her foes, she executed another flowing attack, as if caught up in a heated dance!

“Tch! This ain’t as easy as I thought!”

The mages, taken aback by Saji’s versatility, decided to shift focus—directing their arms to Xenovia.

“Chimera!”

The mages summoned a horde of motley monsters to strike back at her! A giant birdlike creature swooped down from above, while a snakelike chimera slithered across the ground! Xenovia readied her Holy Sword and honed her holy aura to counter both.

At that moment, a third chimera tore through the floor, a turtle-like monster in an armored shell!

Xenovia struck back, attempting to fell the turtle-like beast in a single, overwhelming hit!

However, its shell must have been unimaginably durable, as her sword lodged hard into its carapace, refusing to come out!

She was immobilized!

Within seconds, the birdlike chimera and its snake counterpart lunged at her!

Using its Mimic ability, Xenovia succeeded in transforming the Ex-Durendal just before they could reach her!

She raised the Holy Sword into the air, flicking it like a whip to cleave the airborne monster in two! A huge shock rang out at the moment of impact. Doubtless, she'd augmented the attack with the Excalibur Destruction!

There was still the problem of the snake chimera, though!

Xenovia returned her weapon to its original sword form, increasing her speed. Then, with a swift downward strike, she sliced the serpentine monster clean in two. Judging by the shockwave that carved a massive crater in the concrete floor, the destructive power must have been amplified.

Excalibur Mimic, Rapid, and Destruction—all three were on full display, and Xenovia had shifted between them expertly.

It left the mages reeling!

““““I thought she was a power-obsessed numbskull?!““““ they cried in alarm.

Just what sort of reputation did Xenovia have in the mage world?! I mean, she *was* power-obsessed, but she was growing!

“Ugh! Take this!”

One mage conjured up spheres of flame, unleashing them in several staggered volleys! Those fiery spheres moved freely through the air, as if imbued with wills of their own!

Xenovia tried to disperse them with her Holy Sword, but unable to score a direct hit, she only narrowly managed to leap to safety. Ah, I knew it! She wasn't yet up to dealing with these kinds of attacks!

“*Xenovia,*” came the chairwoman's voice with fresh instructions. “*Use Excalibur Ruler.*”

“But I haven't mastered that one yet. And how would trying to control those mages get me anywhere?”

“*Ruler can control more than just living creatures.*”

Huh? What was she talking about?

Fireballs sped through the air, flying toward their target from every direction!

“*Xenovia! Direct the Ruler at those spells! Concentrate! Command them to*

*stop! If I'm not mistaken, you should be able to push your sword abilities to the next level!"*

*"—!"*

Xenovia wore a pained look as she focused. The Holy Sword in her hands responded with a burst of light!

Suddenly, the fireballs heading toward her froze, suspended in midair!

Had *she* done that with her sword's powers of domination? No one was more shocked than Xenovia herself.

"I had no idea it could be used like that... What's going on, Chairwoman?"

*"I suspected as much. Your Holy Sword can command more than just living beings. It can dominate magic, too, and more, I believe. If mastered, you may well be able to command most any phenomenon. But if that's too difficult, you can focus on your enemies' attacks. You could also support your allies should their own moves miss."*

"So I can disrupt opponents and shore up my friends' attacks?"

*"Yes. Those would be the most straightforward approaches. But if you delve deeper, other possibilities may emerge. Like how you just used Excalibur Ruler."*

*"..."*

I was left speechless. *Way to go, Chairwoman.* She'd gone so far as to develop new strategies for us... How deep was her intellect when it came to combat?

"Go for the Sitri leader!"

The mages began concentrating their attacks on Sona, hoping to take down our group's brains!

Yet at that moment, a powerful blue barrier fell over the rear guard—all thanks to the Bishop Momo Hanakai!

"I won't let you harm the chairwoman or any of our support team!"

A pair of bracelets radiating with power had appeared on her arms.

Were they a barrier-type artificial Sacred Gear? They had to be quite potent to cover the entire rear guard!

Our support members wouldn't go down without a fight! Now those of us up front could fight with no worries!

The mages didn't seem to care about the barrier, though. They loosed their attacks regardless! Several mages seemed to simply vanish into thin air, quickly reappearing a split second later as they teleported across the field in an effort to sneak behind our lines!

"Eat thiiiisss!"

An upside-down magic square unfolded directly above, a huge boulder spiraling out! If something like that hit the rear guard, not even Hanakai's barrier would be able to hold!

"Oh dear. I'm afraid not."

With a fearless chuckle, Akeno unleashed a fantastic show of demonic power, a potent mix of lightning and holy light in the form of a Japanese-style dragon!

The boulder was shattered, effortlessly swatted by the explosive lightning barrage! Fragments rained down all around, but the lightning dragon continued to dart through the air like a thing alive, consuming the debris before it could hit us!

Akeno snapped her fingers—and six fallen angel wings unfurled behind her back. On her wrists, she wore two golden bracelets inscribed with magic glyphs.

"...Lightning Dragon—a new technique I picked up after absorbing Issei's dragon energy."

Seriously?! She was using all that dragon energy she had absorbed to forge a lightning dragon capable of moving around with a will of its own!

"The Queen has left herself open!"

The mages, unfazed even by that giant boulder's destruction, launched into their next assault!

The next moment, they unleashed a volley of light arrows! Holy light was extremely deadly to demons! One direct hit, and we'd be done for!

Akeno remained unconcerned and conjured a magic array of her own, blocking the attack! And that was no ordinary array. It had demonic glyphs and

magical symbols inscribed in it! *When did she learn magic?!*

“Oh-ho-ho, I learned a little defensive trick from Rossweisse. One that enhances my Rook properties.”

She was using spells to strengthen herself the way Rossweisse did? That stood to reason. Rooks typically used magic and other techniques to bolster their guard.

Koneko achieved the same thing with demonic powers, although she hadn't quite mastered it yet. Akeno was skilled when it came to offense, but her defenses weren't at the same level, especially against formidable enemies.

Being a Queen, Akeno possessed all the properties of Rook, Knight, and Bishop pieces. Yet even a Queen had intrinsic weak points when it came to juggling the aspects of those three roles.

For instance, when I used my Triaina technique, I had the most innate affinity with the Rook option, while I was far less proficient as a Bishop. That was why I decided to specialize in artillery attacks. The same applied even in my True Queen state.

Akeno and I were opposites in that regard. She had the least affinity with the Rook piece, which meant that defense was likewise her weakest suit. The Bishop role, naturally, better drew on her proficiencies.

That being said, with our having fought against so many formidable opponents, Akeno was attempting to overcome her weaknesses by bolstering her defense-type magic. She wasn't great at visualizing defensive moves, but it seemed she'd discovered a way to compensate by drawing on spells!

“Someone's been naughty! You're in need of discipline!”

With a sadistic look, Akeno fired a barrage of fire and ice, both shaped like dragons, to wipe out the group of mages closing in on the chairwoman. To think that absorbing my dragon energy could have such a huge impact! Was my strength particularly potent because I was the Red Dragon Emperor?

*“These mages are clever enough to evade our formation...but it seems Akeno has learned from her defeat in the Rating Game to drastically increase her own performance,”* the chairwoman said.

Yep, Akeno had been practicing like crazy! She'd been down in the dumps after reading the negative appraisals of herself in Rating Game magazines, and so, with Rias's help, she had adopted a daily regimen to improve on her weaknesses.

*"Issei, it's your turn!"* came the chairwoman's voice once more. *"Transfer your power to Rossweisse!"*

"Right!"

All throughout this time, I had been hovering over the battlefield with Ryuuteimaru, ready to assist my allies at the chairwoman's direction. No sooner did I send a power-up to Rossweisse than she unleashed a full burst, an attack notable not for its power, but for the variety and numbers of its moves.

The mages at the front of the pack were clearly tiring! We had taken the advantage!

"Go for the Red Dragon Emperor!"

Magical projectiles came flying my way while I soared overhead, only to be blocked by an assortment of strange masks in different shapes appearing and disappearing in their path.

"Watch and protect. That's the role of my Sacred Gear," said the Bishop Reya Kusaka.

*"Reya's artificial Sacred Gear is capable of summoning masks good for reconnaissance and defense,"* the chairwoman explained.

Huh. In that case, I could probably fly safely over practically any part of the battlefield. The Sitri Familia sure seemed to have an incredibly diverse skill set!

*"Issei! Transfer your power to Tsubaki!"*

In came my next orders! I dove down near Shinra—when all of a sudden, a huge block of ice, large enough to cover a full third of the battlefield, started hurtling toward us!

Seeing that Shinra had summoned up a mirror of some sort, I knew at once what she planned to do. A counter!

She'd use her Sacred Gear to reflect the attack back the way it had come—



doubled in strength!

*“Boost Tsubaki’s counter, Issei. With the power of the Red Dragon Emperor, even an attack of that magnitude should be no problem!”*

Following the chairwoman’s instructions, I transferred my power to Shinra!

With that, her mirror began to glow, undergoing a massive transformation!

*“Tsubaki! Reflect it back at them, but don’t bring the ceiling down on top of us all!”*

“Understood, Chairwoman!”

The huge mass of ice collided with the supersize mirror, sending a shrill shattering sound echoing across the field! A moment later, however, it ricocheted backward with twice the intensity!

The broken chunks of ice rained in huge pieces, striking the mages down left and right.

“Curse that ice!”

“Impossible! That Sacred Gear increased its power! It’s piercing our defenses!”

Panicked screams erupted from among the mages.

Indeed, Shinra’s Sacred Gear had boosted the ice’s attack power, making the ice too much for the opposing mages to handle.

A full half of our opponents had been laid low thanks to this latest counter, thrown backward into walls and floors and blacking out.

“It’s ready, Chairwoman!” Saji called.

An unusually thick line jutted from his right arm.

*“Good work, Saji. Connect it to Issei and use it to scatter our foes!”*

As directed, Saji threw one end of the line my way with full force. The oversize vein adhered tightly to my gauntlet, but what exactly was I supposed to do with it? The next moment, Saji disconnected himself and slung it over his shoulder.

“Break apart!” he roared. Sure enough, the line branched into a dozen smaller

threads, all of them flying in different directions as if seeking out targets to latch onto!

The lines raced across the field, attaching to each of our team members! Everyone was linked to me!

*“Now, Issei, you can channel your power to each of us. Please move back to the rear. Your only remaining task is to transfer additional power to each of us once you’ve finished doubling your energy.”*

Transferring power to everyone! Huh, that would make this an easy killing! I wouldn’t even have to move around the field to do it! Yep, I would fall back to safety!

*“I would have liked to do this from the beginning of this encounter,”* the chairwoman admitted over my earpiece. *“However, given your recent evolution, Saji needed time to prepare a line strong enough to channel your powers. If we attempted this with an insufficiently durable line, your powers might well go out of control. Now that we know the principle is sound after you shared your energy with Rossweisse, we can attempt the same process with our entire party.”*

All this left me positively speechless. The chairwoman knew exactly how to maximize my abilities!

*“Your abilities have a remarkably high affinity with Saji’s,”* she continued brightly. *“I do very much enjoy coming up with strategies to put you both to use.”*

Man, I was grateful to have Sona on our side!

*“I believe the first round is ours.”*

Indeed, when I looked back up, the opposing mages had been utterly defeated.

-○●○-

“That should do it!”

“Thank you, Argento.”

Having finished healing Nimura, Asia moved on to her next patient.

Our side had absolutely dominated the battle. Of the enemy mages, only a small number were so much as able to stand. Our next task was to tend to our wounded.

I had kept to the rear guard after that last show of force. There, in relative safety, I kept on channeling more power through my gauntlet to my friends and allies.

“Let’s go, Irina!”

“Yep!”

Xenovia and Irina, having pulled through relatively unscathed, were busy taking care of the stragglers.

Now that Xenovia was beginning to get a grip on her Holy Swords’ many attributes, the remaining mages were unable to stop her.

Irina, meanwhile, had a natural advantage with her Holy Demon Sword. Apparently, with a capable wielder, those mass-produced weapons could be imbued with unique properties, much like Kiba’s.

Thanks to her training with us, Irina was growing in combat proficiency. By now, she could augment her Holy Demon Sword with elemental attributes such as fire, ice, and lightning, giving her a leg up over magic-wielding opponents.

“Oh dear. And I worked so hard on improving my skills.”

“Well, there’s still room to grow.”

Akeno and Rossweisse tore through with their own techniques up ahead, triggering a massive explosion and accompanying burst of wind! The blast easily threw the mages backward into the horde of golems they had summoned to protect themselves!

“Leave the defense to me!”

Meanwhile, Yura, the Rook from the student council, cast her artificial Sacred Gear shield about like a yo-yo, thwarting each and every enemy attack. Flames and electricity burst from the shield, showering her foes in yet more elemental powers. Seriously, a yo-yo wreathed in fire and electricity!

The chairwoman watched from the sidelines. *“Yes, I see now just how lax*

*Rias's tactics truly were."* A sigh came through my earpiece. *"These mages we find ourselves up against are much stronger than average, and yet here we are... I realize after commanding you that the Gremory Familia is simply too powerful. Instead of listening to sensible direction, you are strong enough to rush forward blindly. Especially you, Issei, and Kiba, too—with your Balance Breakers, you would often prevail even without decent tactics. No wonder Rias decided to just let you run amok."*

Sorry our team was all meatheads! We'd been relying on brute force all this time!

I thought we were growing more tactical, but it seemed we were still a crude guerilla team with a few new tricks up our sleeves!

*"You're still dominating the field, even without Issei's Balance Breaker, while keeping the Durendal under wraps, and in Kiba's absence... Like I thought, what the demon Familias of tomorrow need most is more training. We will have to raise your game."*

Eeep! The chairwoman's glasses were giving off a scary glint! We were going to be in for some intense training sessions, that was for sure!

"I, for one, never want to fight the Gremory Familia again," I heard Hanakai mutter.

"Same here. I don't want to die," Kusaka added.

The chairwoman sighed again after overhearing.

Well, I didn't want to fight the Sitri group, either. Chairwoman Sona's mind was her greatest weapon, and there was no way I could stand against that. She was the one behind this entire engagement, combining two teams with drastically different skill sets to maximum effect on short notice!

—!

Suddenly, the remaining mages lifted their hands into the air in surrender.

"All right, all right. You win. Also, our leader wants to see you."

A light erupted before the mage who'd spoken, creating a teleportation circle.

"Your friends and our leader are up ahead. Get going already. Just be sure to

take your Red Dragon Emperor, Vritra, Durendal warrior, the Vestal of Holy Lightning, your healer, the Valkyrie, and Michael's Ace," the mage said with a sullen look.

What a heel turn. The mages had been so eager to test their skills against us just a few minutes ago, and now they were acting like a bunch of beaten dogs... Well, as true as that was, complaining wouldn't get us anywhere with them.

The chairwoman removed her earpiece and activated a small magic circle for communication.

"We'll have our members on standby on the surface take these people into custody."

"Huh?! You're gonna take us hostage?! Y-you're kidding, right?! You only really need the Khaos Brigade mages, don't you?!"

Did that stray mage honestly believe a word he was saying?

We were the victims. We weren't about to just laugh any of this off. Was he saying it was all just a game to them?!

I recognized the mage at once. He'd been in the group that attacked me at a school.

Saji grabbed him by the collar, fixing him with a baleful glare. "Cut the crap! This is all because of you people!" He stopped himself there, shaking his head and releasing the defeated enemy. "I've gotta keep my calm. Don't wanna lose it in front of Hyoudou..."

His clenched fists trembled.

Before coming here, Saji had calmly told me to put the school out of mind and focus on rescuing Koneko and the others. Deep down, however, he had to be fuming like the rest of us.

He was a member of the student council, always running around doing this or that in the interests of the academy's students. He loved Kuou Academy more than anyone.

I rested a hand on Saji's shoulder, flashed him a smile, and punched the good-for-nothing mage in the face.

“If you want to come after someone, then target us! Regular students are off-limits!”

The mage fell to his feet, staring up at me with a confused expression.

*Sorry, Teach. When it comes to my friends, I guess I can't stay calm...*

Hitting that mage made me feel a little better, though.

Saji laughed. “You’re an idiot, Hyoudou.”

“That makes two of us, buddy.”

Kiba, Gasper, Saji, and me—maybe the dim-witted male demons of Kuou Academy needed to spend some more time together.

We did exactly as the mages asked, sending only the Gremory Familia, Irina, the chairwoman, and Saji through the teleportation square. The remaining members of the Sitri Familia remained behind to transfer the captive mages to the underworld, where officials from each of the three great powers would take them into custody.

Apparently, there had been a separate altercation between those who had gone back to the surface and another group of mages. There, a band of female mages, it seemed, had summoned an armada of stone and clay golems along with other monsters for sending underground. Our opponents had evidently wanted to keep their female members clear from my abilities, but our allies defeated them all the same.

And so, casting our apprehensions aside, we made our way to this so-called leader.

After passing through the teleportation square, we emerged in a vast, white space.

There was nothing there—just stark white on all four sides.

...The ceiling was awfully high up. Whatever it was, this area wasn’t as massive as our usual training space, but it was still large enough for us to be as reckless as the situation called for.

“We call this place the Factory, a little something we constructed in the dimensional void. It’s built using the same techniques as your Rating Game

fields,” explained an unfamiliar voice at our backs.

Looking over my shoulder, I spotted a figure that hadn’t been there a moment earlier.

The tall figure was dressed in an intricately decorated silver robe. Judging by his voice, he had to be a young man.

His hood was pulled low to conceal his face.

I figured he was another mage, and spent a moment scrutinizing him, until...

“Issei!”

That was Ravel! I glanced around, spotting her and Koneko a good distance away. Koneko carried a limp Gasper on her back. What had those mages done to him?!

Neither Ravel or Koneko looked restrained in any way, and they were still in their Kuou Academy uniforms. At first glance, Gasper seemed unharmed, too, at least physically.

“You can have them back,” the robed man stated flatly.

While watching to see how he would react, we beckoned Ravel and Koneko to join us.

The robed man said nothing as they both hurried over.

“Issei...” Tears stained Ravel’s cheeks.

“What did they do, Ravel?” I asked. “We heard they were after you because you’re from the House of Phenex...”

Ravel trembled in wordless silence. I saw no injuries on her, but clearly something disturbing had happened.

Koneko lowered Gasper to the ground while Asia saw to healing him.

“They examined using a magic circle,” Koneko muttered, biting her lip in frustration. “It didn’t hurt us, but Gasper...”

His face had been beaten to the point of swollen discoloration. I hardly recognized him...

“Gasper tried to protect us...,” Koneko said mournfully.

Seeing him beaten beyond recognition ignited white-hot fury in me.

“We are responsible, I’m afraid,” the robed man confessed. “He tried to shield the other two, and it seems my underlings resorted to violence to subdue him. Other than that, we have treated all three of your friends with every courtesy.”

Gasper had tried to protect Koneko and Ravel...

He truly was a man of the Gremory Familia.

The auras of everyone in our Familia, mine included, simmered with barely contained rage.

How could they do that to our cute underclassmen?! We weren’t about to let this go unpunished!

A perfectly composed Chairwoman Sona restrained me with a hand on my shoulder. “Are you the mastermind of all this, the man behind the curtain?” she questioned.

“Indeed, I am,” the mage answered without hesitation.

*I knew it.* This was the so-called “leader” the other mages had been going on about.

“Are you with the Khaos Brigade?” the chairwoman asked again. “If so, what is the reason for these attacks?”

“Presently, yes. Our goals are numerous. Most of us sought merely to sate our curiosity, to test you. Although not the more long-standing members of the Khaos Brigade...”

“So you stray mages formed an alliance with the remnants of the Khaos Brigade,” the chairwoman said. “The mages we encountered before seemed to be a mix of people expelled from the Council of Mages and others who’d joined forces with the Khaos Brigade much earlier. I recognized many of their spells from previous attacks hoping to disrupt the peace talks between the three great powers.”

“Indeed.”



The chairwoman narrowed her eyes. “Does this assault have anything to do with the Council of Mages’s evaluations of us? The mage who attacked Issei Hyoudou commented on his rank, and the ones we fought earlier seemed awfully interested in seeing our powers up close.”

“Oh? I see an explanation is unnecessary. Yes, that’s correct. They were curious to see how their skills would fare against demons of your caliber.”

This attack was all because Mephisto Pheles’ Council of Mages thought highly of us?! I probably didn’t need to say this, but could they be any more selfish?!

“There are a great many young mages among our ranks,” the man continued. “Some find it difficult to control themselves.”

“I see,” the chairwoman said with a nod. “The followers of the old Demon Kings were the leading force within the Khaos Brigade until the Hero Faction rose to prominence. Now that they’re both gone, I assume you decided to fill the power vacuum?”

“Precisely. First Shalba Beelzebub, then Cao Cao, directed our organization, but now I share in command...and it’s surprisingly difficult. This present incident is partly because of rogue elements acting of their own accord. There were also several voices from the top suggesting that our people be given the leeway to do as they please.”

...That was it?! So we had been dragged into some political dispute between rival mages?! Seriously...?! Hold on, *voices from the top*...? So there were others higher than this man in his group’s hierarchy? Were those the Khaos Brigade remnants Azazel had mentioned?

“That is the first reason,” the man continued. “As for the second...”

He snapped his fingers, and the wall to our right to sank down at the command.

A laboratory was revealed, complete with an assortment of what I could only guess were incubation capsules.

Each was connected to some kind of device, and there was *something* inside them.

Ravel averted her gaze. On closer inspection, I finally recognized the things floating in those liquid-filled capsules—humanoid figures.

This display could hardly be any more disturbing

“Do you know how Phoenix Tears are produced?” the man asked nonchalantly. “A pure-blooded demon from the House of Phenex must perform a ritual by magic circle, bringing with them a specially sanctified cup. Once their tears mingle with the water inside that vessel, it creates a healing tonic. It is said that when a Phenex weeps, their tears must be shed without emotion, or else the water would have no healing effect. Tears borne of pain or pity, whether for oneself or another, are equally ineffective.” The man paused there to point at the capsules in the laboratory. “We call this the Factory because our mages have been hard at work cloning your high-class Phenex demons to mass-produce our very own Phoenix Tears... Of course, the decision has been made to abandon this particular facility, so the equipment you see before you has already ceased operations.”

Clones of demons from the House of Phenex?! Th-those mages had gone that far to manufacture fake Phoenix Tears?!

And they’d shown this to Ravel! No wonder she seemed so out of sorts! She was the eldest daughter of the Phenex family! To see her people used and abused like this... I couldn’t begin to fathom her pain!

The chairwoman narrowed her eyes in disgust. “And you’ve been selling your fake Phoenix Tears on the black market to raise an enormous quantity of funds. The idea itself is grotesque in the extreme. You’ve been targeting members of the House of Phenex to improve the quality of production, I assume?”

“I’m glad to see you’re so quick on the uptake, Sona of the House of Sitri. Yes, it seems there are limits to our research when it comes to emulating the Phenex’s innate properties, so our mages resorted to kidnapping a true Phenex to extract the information we needed—hence Ravel. There are certain things that can only be learned from blood, you see. But you needn’t worry. We didn’t harm her or the others. We simply analyzed her demonic properties to improve our manufacturing process.”

But the psychological wounds they had inflicted on her...!

“It’s terrible... Cloning... How... How could they do such a thing?” Ravel’s eyes were locked on the incubation capsules, tears of anguish falling from her eyes.

Seriously, where did those mages find the nerve? With their previous supply of Phoenix Tears cut off, I guess they’d turned to developing their own.

“The information we acquired from Gasper Vladi came as an unexpected surprise,” the man continued dispassionately.

This guy’s words had been utterly devoid of emotion from the start, as though none of this concerned him one bit.

He spun around abruptly, his robe billowing behind him. “Now then, for our final demand. There is a certain someone who would relish the opportunity to fight such powerful individuals as yourselves. Would you be so kind as to accommodate him? In fact, that was the primary objective of our raid. Helping the mages with their project was simply a convenient bonus.”

With those words, light sped across the floor as a gigantic magic circle formed between us and the hooded figure.

Hold on, someone else wanted to fight us? And that was why they had gone to all this trouble?

Was this all to satisfy some idiot’s ego?!

I recognized that array. It was the exact same pattern as the one we’d used to summon the massive Dragon King, Midgardsormr.

“A Dragon Gate...,” Saji whispered.

Yup. That was a Dragon Gate all right! A special kind of magic square for summoning super-powerful dragons! Back when I was trapped in the dimensional void, the others had tried to call me back using something similar!

The Dragon Gate emitted a soft, green light. Did the color change depending on the dragon being summoned?

Ddraig was red, Albion white, Vritra black, Fafnir gold, Yulong green, Midgardsormr gray, Tiamat blue, and old Tannin purple.

“Huh? Green? Isn’t that one of the Five Great Dragon Kings, the Jade Dragon Yulong? Why him?!”

He was that easygoing dragon with the green aura we met in Kyoto! Did this mean *he* wanted to fight us? Why?

The chairwoman shook her head. “No, that isn’t Yulong’s green... It’s a much darker shade...”

She was right. This was a more intense type of green... So it wasn’t Yulong?

“Is there a dragon associated with myrtle green...?” Irina asked quietly.

“Yes. A dragon from an age now past,” the silver-robed man replied.

The Dragon Gate shined ever brighter, bursting with an explosion of light!

*Booooooooooom!*

A cry, so loud that it reverberated through our surroundings, sounded from the mouth of the creature as it appeared.

It was massive, covered in dark, scaly skin, and stood on two burly legs. Fearsome horns, claws, and fangs glinted. Its wings were disproportionately large for its body, as was its tail.

It was more a dragon-like giant than any dragon I’d seen before, as it stood more like a human with a tail, wings, and a reptilian head.

“This is the legendary Crime Force Dragon, Grendel,” the robed man announced.

The massive creature opened its maw, revealing rows of razor-sharp fangs. Its silvery eyes were just as sharp, shining with hostility and murderous intent.

“Gwa-ha-ha-ha! It’s been too long since I last dived through a Dragon Gate! Now then, who am I facing? They’re here, I hope? I want a tough-as-nails bastard worth my time and effort!”

All of us were rendered speechless by the sight of this mysterious dragon. They rivaled old Tannin in size.

However, there could be no mistaking the difference between Tannin and this newly arrived dragon. Not in appearance, though.

This dragon possessed an incredibly ominous, unsettling aura. One glance was enough to get a full measure of its evil nature.

A human-size black serpent—Vritra—emerged from Saji’s shadow.

“G-Grendel...?!” Vritra exclaimed in shock, his eyes darkening.

I remembered now.

This was one of the dragons Azazel had mentioned the other day... But I thought he was supposed to be dead! What was he doing here?!

“Impossible,” Vritra continued. *“The first Beowulf utterly destroyed you and ended your tyrannical reign.”*

Grendel turned his gaze to Vritra and me. “...! You again! Red! A Heavenly Dragon! And Vritra! Oh? What’s with that look?” he bellowed, his eyes narrowing in a show of curiosity.

“The Two Heavenly Dragons were destroyed, their essences sealed within Sacred Gears,” the robed man explained.

“Gwa-ha-ha-ha!” the dragon laughed. “You were taken down? How amusing! How fitting! And you call yourselves Heavenly Dragons? But indeed, you are a suitable opponent to awaken to!”

Still laughing, the dragon spread his wings and lowered his posture!

Grendel was going to charge us...! I could tell from his aura that this was no small threat!

And here I was, far from peak performance. Plus, we didn’t even have all our members!

Xenovia readied her sword. “Are we gonna have to fight that thing?”

Irina did the same with her own weapon. “B-but I’ve never fought a legendary dragon before!”

“Me neither. I faced those fake Midgardsormrs and baby Fenrirs when we went after Loki... But just look at that thing! It’s clearly Dragon King–class! Maybe higher!”

Xenovia was right. This Grendel possibly exceeded Dragon King–level...

“Aren’t you going to equip your armor, Red Dragon Emperor?” the robed man asked.

“Sorry. I’m not feeling up to it.”

“That’s going to be a problem. We worked to ensure a battle between you and Grendel.”

*Sorry to disappoint...*

I would’ve activated my armor if I could’ve! Maybe it was worth calling Ddraig again?

“Hey, Ddraig? Can you hear me in there? I need you to wake up. It’s urgent. It looks like we’re up against a dragon called Grendel... Hey, Ddraig!” I shouted into the jewel embedded in my gauntlet.

There was no response. Was he still asleep?

Suddenly...

“...”

D-did I hear something?

“Ddraig? Hey! What’s wrong?” I called again.

*“Who are you?”*

Huh? That was definitely Ddraig’s voice, but he wasn’t making any sense...

“D-Ddraig...?”

*“Yep, I’m Ddraig. I’m a baby dragon!”*

“...”

*Huh?*

“Whaaaaaat?!” I screamed, my eyes all but popping from their sockets.

A *baby* dragon?! What the heck happened to him?!

“Could it be?” the chairwoman muttered.

I guess everyone else overheard that ridiculous exchange.

“Do you know what’s wrong with him, Chairwoman Sona?” Akeno asked.

“This is merely my best guess, but the Red Dragon Emperor may have become mentally disturbed from the shock of Issei’s Breast Dragon activities, further

compounded when he exhausted his powers to resurrect Issei. I suspect he still hasn't revived completely, and has regressed to an infantile stage."

*I-infantile regression?! Like in manga and on TV?!*

"Your breast obsession has worn him out....," Koneko said.

Seriously?! All that Breast Dragon stuff had taxed him so much his mind regressed to that of a child?

A childish lilt entered Ddraig's voice. *"Breasts... So scary..."*

Even the mere mention of them was enough to set him off?!

What on earth?! Did he really hate breasts so much that he'd run away from reality?!

"Ddraig!" I said in as calm a voice as I could muster. "Come on, Ddraig. Breasts aren't scary. They're soft and wonderful!"

Breasts were the stuff of miracles! They'd saved our lives countless times over!

*"I can't get it out of my head... Squishy, squishy, ooooooh..."*

Uh-oh! His trauma ran deeper than I thought! This was serious!

"How does a heavenly dragon revert to being a kid?!" Saji exclaimed, just as shocked as the rest of us. "What did you do, Issei?! How did you drive him to this?!"

That's what I wanted to know! What was I supposed to do now?!

"Can you do anything, Vritra?" Saji asked.

*"Perhaps another Dragon King could pull his mind back from the depths,"* the black Dragon King answered.

Another Dragon King? Well, we very conveniently had one in front of us, but I didn't get the feeling Grendel was willing to help.

"Hey. Where's my fight? What happened to that bastard Ddraig?" Grendel asked the man in the silver robe.

"Evidently, Heavenly Dragons aren't immune to existential crises. Why don't

we see how this develops?”

*Existential crises?! Don't talk about it like that! You're making it out to be all my fault!*

“Leave this to me!” came an unexpected voice. Asia's. She stepped forward, brimming with confidence and resolution.

“Your preparations are complete, I see,” the chairwoman said. “Then we're in your hands, Asia.”

Huh? Had Asia learned a new trick or something?

Despite my surprise, Asia began to recite an invocation. A moment later, a golden magic circle appeared before her!

“Answer my call, O Golden King. Creep upon the earth and receive my offering.”

With that chant, the golden magic square glowed with yet greater intensity.

A second Dragon Gate began to open, and this time, I recognized its golden radiance!

“Come out! Gigantis Dragon Fafnir!”

The second Asia's spell was complete, Fafnir himself answered, a giant four-legged dragon covered in golden scales.

A majestic aura radiated from his body. Like Grendel, Fafnir was over ten meters in length. However, he lacked wings.

Some kind of cloth was wrapped around the horns jutting from his head... Was that part of the spell?

*Hold on... Fafnir?! The same Dragon King Azazel made a pact with to turn into a suit of golden armor?! No wonder I recognized his golden glow!*

My surprise must have been pretty obvious, because the chairwoman launched into an explanation. “After retiring as governor, Azazel terminated his contract with the Dragon King. However, since simply letting the dragon go would be such a waste, he suggested that Asia enter into a pact with him instead.”



I knew Azazel was stepping back, but I never expected him to leave Fafnir with Asia!

He did say Asia had potential as a monster tamer, though, and he'd certainly urged her to make pacts with legendary creatures. He'd even suggested finding a creature strong enough to protect her while she was healing others. All of that led to her getting a Dragon King?!

"It seems her efforts were a success, just as Rias said. I see now why Ophis offered Asia her blessing," the chairwoman remarked.

"Ophis's blessing? Ah! Azazel did mention something about that!"

Come to think of it, I'd seen Azazel talking with Asia and Ophis before he left for Europe. And Asia spoke with Ophis pretty regularly. Was this why?

The chairwoman shook her head. "Asia's aura has acquired some kind of divine quality from Ophis. When I examined her, we learned that while it hasn't led to a direct change in ability, her luck and general level of compatibility with dragons has increased. Ophis herself seems to have granted the power unawares. Irina Shidou has benefitted in a similar way."

"Yep! I'm on fire! Just the other day, I won second prize in the raffle at the shopping center! Talk about lucky!" Irina said with a thumbs-up.

Second place didn't sound like divine fortune...

"H-have I gotten anything...?" I asked. "I mean, Ophis is always following me around..."

"...In your case, Issei, it would be more appropriate to say that you've been possessed. You've taken on a burden of karma that I doubt even a god could exorcise."

Ophis's influence over me was so strong that not even the divine could hope to remove it?!

"Thanks to Ophis's help, Fafnir agreed to a pact with Asia. Fafnir is a legendary dragon with a horde of treasures collected from all over the world, and Asia had to provide suitable payment to forge the pact... I hear the cost was considerable."

“What exactly did she give him?” I asked.

The chairwoman hesitated to reply. “Th-that’s... I’ve said too much...”

H-huh? She couldn’t say?

“I have to know! Asia means the world to me! What did she give up to recruit a Dragon King?! Please, tell me!”

It had to be something important, right? What was it?! Asia and I were family, so I had to know!

The chairwoman blushed, finally whispering “...anties...”

I couldn’t make it out!

“Huh? I can’t hear you! Can you say it more loudly?”

Then, red with embarrassment, Asia shouted: “Panties!”

“...”

*...Huh?!*

Now I understood what those pieces of cloth wrapped around the dragon’s horns were!

Panties! Women’s underwear!

Only then did Fafnir speak up. “I am delighted to receive the greatest of treasures, these mighty panties.”

Mighty panties?

It couldn’t be...

This dragon was a total perv!

What kind of Dragon King agreed to a pact in exchange for underwear?! No, back up a second! How the heck did Azazel get him on our side, then?! With panties?! Did he have to go find some?!

“I believe Azazel gave him a more traditional treasure,” the chairwoman added, seemingly reading my thoughts.

*I—I see! How silly of me! Of course he wouldn’t pay in panties!*

As far as first impressions went, this could hardly be any worse! I'd only ever seen Fafnir as Azazel's cool armor. If this was his real personality...

"Fafnir!" Asia, still visibly embarrassed, called to the underwear-loving Dragon King. "Ddraig's mental state is bad! As a legendary dragon, is there anything you can do to help?"

"...There is."

*Whoa, seriously?*

"Really?! Then please, please help him come back to his usual self!" Asia implored.

"More treasure, please."

*—! He was haggling over payment!*

"A-all right. That's what our contract says..."

Enduring the humiliation of doing all this in public, Asia reached into her pocket—and retrieved a cute pair of light blue panties.

"Th-that's her favorite!" Xenovia shouted.

"You're giving them to him, Asia?!" Irina followed suit.

Her favorite pair?!

"Don't do it, Asia! You don't need to go that far! Hey, you! Dragon King! What do you want with Asia's panties?!" I demanded.

"Mighty panties. Mighty treasure," that damn dragon answered, his expression unchanging.

I understood that! Yes, they were definitely a treasure! One too precious to give away!

"Hey, Vritra!" I shouted. "You're a Dragon King, too, aren't you?! Can't *you* talk this guy into seeing sense?!"

*Come on, Vritra! Tell this panties-loving weirdo what's what!*

*"It's none of my business."*

He'd chosen to keep out of it!

“Wait!” Xenovia shouted. “Don’t give them to him, Asia! He can have mine!”

“What are you saying, Xenovia?!” Irina exclaimed, holding out a hand to stop her. “You aren’t wearing any panties underneath that combat suit!”

“Ugh! Fafnir! How about this outfit, then?! That’s gotta be enough for you!”

Xenovia started removing her combat suit!

Her friendship with Asia was a force to be reckoned with! She’d sooner give up her own clothes than force Asia to surrender her underwear.

*“I want the beautiful blond girl’s panties. Mighty panties from the Panties Nun.”*

“Asia isn’t some panties nun!” I shouted, stomping over to Fafnir and smacking him over the head.

The dragon didn’t even flinch!

*I won’t let you get away with this, Dragon King!*

Dammit! First, everyone started calling Rias the Switch Princess, and now Asia was a Panties Nun!

“Hey. What’s the meaning of this?” Grendel asked the robed man. “Is Fafnir to be my opponent? Is it time to attack?”

“No, please wait a moment. The Heavenly Dragons and their friends have gone through a rather irregular evolutionary process this cycle, obsessing over women’s breasts and buttocks... Ddraig is still preparing. The real show will begin momentarily, I assure you.”



*Quit answering him so earnestly! And quit acting like you know what I'm going to do! Also, are you lumping Team Vali in with us? Don't bully Albion, either!*

"I'll give them to you!"

Her face as red as a ripe tomato, Asia hooked her sky blue panties on a horn jutting from the dragon's nose.

Xenovia and Irina, her dear friends, burst into tears.

"Oh, Asia! You're so selfless and brave!"

"Lord! Please, smile upon Asia's act of self-sacrifice!"

Asia had completed the offering to the dragon with her two friends watching.

The golden dragon flared its nostrils, taking in a deep breath!

Was he going to breath fire?

I watched on expectantly.

"Lil' Asia's panties. *Sniff!*"

The dragon started single-mindedly sniffing the panties!

"Don't you dare!" I shouted furiously. It was my second time butting heads with this Dragon King!

*She isn't "Lil' Asia" to you, dammit! Arghhhhhh!*

He was thoroughly enjoying those panties snagged on the tip of his nose, literally savoring their scent! Could that dragon be any more of a perv?!

"I can't get married anymore!" Asia wailed, unable to bear the shame any longer. She covered her face in her hands.

"I have received these mighty panties. Ddraig! Cure!"

With those words, Fafnir released golden aura upon my gauntlet.

"*Ngh! What a disgrace!*" Vritra complained, adding in his own black aura.

A suspense-filled heartbeat later, the Boosted Gear's gemstone shined with its usual radiance.



*“Wh-where am I?! Ah! It’s you, partner!”*

*Ddraaiiiggg! You’re back!*

“Ugh. I’m so happy to hear your voice, Ddraig... We paid a huge sacrifice to bring you back...!”

Asia had been forced to surrender her precious panties! Her underwear had brought Ddraig back from the brink, but there was no way I could tell him that!

“Asiaaaaa!” I shouted. “It’s not like you can’t marry anymore! Don’t worry! I’ll take full responsibility!”

“Issei!” Asia sobbed, covering her mouth with one hand. “Please be gentle with me!”

“You betcha! Ah, what cruel fate! Damn it all!”

*“Sniff-sniff.”*

Curse you, Panties Dragon, for relishing their scent!

“I told you to quit snorting them, you damn Pervert King! Aaaargh!”

At any rate, Ddraig was back, and I needed to get to work.

“I won’t let Asia’s sacrifice go to waste! Balance Breaker!”

*“Welsh Dragon: Balance Breaker!”*

With a burst of red power, my armor materialized, covering me from head to toe!

Huh. I guess I didn’t need a countdown anymore.

Was that thanks to Ophis and the Great Red? I’d take it either way. There was no need to waste any more time!

Fully armored, I stood before Grendel.

“—! Grendel? I thought he was destroyed long before I met my fate...?” Ddraig exclaimed in shock.

“Gwa-ha-ha-ha! I was in a miserable state. But no matter. Come, Ddraig! Long have I waited for this moment! Let us slay one another once again!” the dragon bellowed with a fearless grin.

*"I take it your soul wasn't sealed in a Sacred Gear like mine... How did you manage to come back in mortal form?"* Ddraig questioned.

"We don't need to go into the details. What matters is I'm strong, and you're strong! Let's have at each other!"

Grendel lowered his body to the ground, ready to storm toward us.

*"Partner, that dragon is insane. He cares only for violence... If you're going to fight him, don't make the mistake of showing him mercy."*

I never would've expected to hear that from Ddraig. So this Grendel was that unhinged, was he?

"You're one to talk! You, a so-called Heavenly Dragon!" Grendel shot back gleefully. "There is no heaven, no god, no truth when it comes to dragons!"

Whoa, talk about scary. Grendel exuded such hostility. His aura was on another level compared to old Tannin's.

*"This will be your first experience facing a legendary-class dragon in earnest, partner."*

Yeah. I'd endured old Tannin's survival camp in the mountains, but we never did any real fighting. It was just training.

"Hey. You. All of you," Grendel bellowed. "I've changed my mind. I'll fight Ddraig one-on-one."

I had a feeling this would happen, but it was fine.

All this time, my fury had been building up inside. Now that I was in my armor, I was ready to erupt.

I was fed up with those mages after their attack on Kuou Academy and what they'd done to Ravel!

"That's fine with me. I'll take care of this, everyone," I declared.

"You're our greatest asset," the chairwoman responded with a soft smile. "Let me say this on Rias's behalf—go for it, Issei!"

*Thanks for the send-off, Chairwoman Sona!*

*You're doing a great job leading us in Rias's stead! Please watch over us until*



*the end! I'll wrap this up!*

Spreading my dragon wings wide, I blasted forward!

*"Jet!"*

As I sped straight for Grendel at high speed, he broke into an ecstatic grin.

"Oh! Yes, excellent! A full-frontal assault! Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Grendel's massive fists came flying my way! A direct hit from an aura that potent would smash me to pieces! I couldn't let him land a hit!

Adjusting my trajectory, I shot past his sharp punch! Only barely, mind you! This Dragon King was no joke!

Getting as close as I could, I changed pieces!

*"Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!"*

*"Welsh Dragonic Rook!"*

*"Change: Solid Impact!"*

All at once, my armor thickened drastically, bolstering my attack and defense.

I dove in, boosting my force and slamming my fist hard against the dragon's face, hoping to send him flying backward!

Grendel staggered, nearly toppling over, yet somehow managed to hold on!

As soon as I landed on my feet, I deactivated my Rook promotion, reverted to my standard armor, and fell back.

Having taken that blow flat on his face, Grendel raised a hand to rub at his cheek.

"Hey, hey, hey. What was that supposed to be?"

"—?!"

I was stunned. That was a hit from my Triaina Rook, which specialized in attack...

Grendel took a direct blow, but he stood unfazed. A small trickle of bluish blood ran from a corner of his mouth, but that was all. Was that the best I could do?

“Is that it?” Grendel snorted. “Your host is weak as hell, Ddraig. The old you was insanely strong. Ugh! What a disappointment!”

Uh-oh. My Triaina wouldn’t cut it this time.

*“You’re going to need to use your True Queen, partner. You can’t let that insult slide.”*

*Got it, Ddraig. I still have to get payback for everything these guys did to Gasper, Ravel, and Koneko!*

I stood up straight and began to chant. “Awakening, I, the Red Dragon Emperor, speak this truth unto the heavens! I embrace infinite hope and immortal dreams, to become the Crimson Dragon Dynast—”

Losing here would be a disgrace to the memory of my predecessors, who surrendered the remnants of their souls for my sake!

Nope, there was no way I was going to come out second best!

*“I shall lead you down the crimson way of the primordial!”*

*“Cardinal Crimson Full Drive!”*

A dazzling aura enveloped my body, dying my armor deep red!

While watching this transformation, Grendel let out another snort.

“Crimson? Interesting, Ddraig! The hell is this? You’ve gone and buffed yourself, eh? Hah!”

The dragon lunged forward! I could hardly believe how agile his huge body was!

After closing the distance in a split second, Grendel lashed out at me with his razor-sharp claws! I leaped back to dodge the strike, countering by thrusting my right fist into his face!

Dammit! This was just like before... My aim was perfect—timing, too—yet my opponent was simply too heavy, his skin too thick! How could his defense be so ridiculously high?!

There was no indication I would be able to send him hurtling backward! He was too heavy, his defenses too strong! It was like his scales were made from

reinforced steel!

*“Grendel boasts the toughest scales of any vanquished dragon,” Ddraig explained. “You’ll need more than half-hearted brute force, partner.”*

“But I can’t fire my Dragon Blaster in here!”

Sure, the technique packed immense firepower, but it would destroy our surroundings in the process. There was no telling how durable this artificial dimension was. A careless attack might bring it all down.

*“Sorry, but you’re not able to use them right now, anyway. I’m still recovering, so there’s a risk they might misfire.”*

Well, my True Queen was already unstable to begin with. Still, I needed to do *something* to deal a major blow.

*“What’s in your left gauntlet, partner?”* Ddraig asked.

Oh, right. I completely forgot about that. I thought I’d outgrown my need for it, but it was perfect for a situation like this!

“Here goes, Ddraig! Haaah!” Grendel’s body swelled and he breathed a massive fireball!

Flame Breath was a dragon’s signature move, after all!

I spread my wings and flew swiftly to the side. Grendel quickly closed in, though. He was so fast!!

The fireball must have been a diversion!

He lashed out at me with his fist, leaving no time to dodge!

*Slam!*

His massive punch shook my whole body! Ugh... Where did he get so much attack power?! It was just a punch, yet it was stronger than Sairaorg in his lion armor!

The blow knocked me out of position in midair, and Grendel took advantage of that opening to swing down, hoping to smash me into the ground.

Sure enough, I took a direct hit, landing on the floor with a deafening thud!

*Guh!*

The tremendous force of the blow and the resulting impact sent a spray of blood flying behind my visor! Crippling pain swept across my flesh!

Damn. This guy was out of this world! He'd transcended even Dragon King-level...!

"Gwa-ha-ha-ha! I'll flatten you like a pancake!"

The next thing I knew, a gigantic foot came hurtling toward me! He was about to trample me. I couldn't let that happen!

I rolled sideways to avoid his heavy stomp and swiftly rose to my feet while his attack shattered the ground, sending tremors through the entire place!

I leaped at once into the air, using my momentum to deliver a sharp uppercut to Grendel's jaw!

*"Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!"*

I hurled a kick of my own into the dragon's chin as hard as I could.

It was a clean hit, yet it still met with a decent amount of resistance... This guy's scales were impossibly thick!

He was just too heavy to send flying! And not merely because of his size. Grendel's defensive stats were through the roof! That made his speed all the more unbelievable!

*"Dragons are the strongest of all creatures, and among them, Dragon Kings and those of higher caliber are monstrously formidable. Never forget that... Evil Dragons and their ilk are just as tenacious as they are ferocious!"*

*I definitely believe it, Ddraig!*

Even after taking that last hit to the jaw, Grendel lashed out relentlessly with his massive fists!

I channeled power to my arms, reactivating my Welsh Dragonic Rook. However, Grendel's strike was so intense that it still threw me across the battlefield and into the far wall!

My spine definitely took damage from that last one! I could hardly breathe!

The impact reverberated straight through my armor!

*“Both his offensive and defensive powers are off the charts!”*

*You can say that again, Ddraig...*

From there, Grendel and I launched into a tangled melee! The dragon kept coming with impossible speed and maneuverability, loosing punches and kicks from seemingly every angle, while swinging his tail to strike at my blind spot! I couldn't let my guard down for a moment!

I couldn't believe a dragon his size could possess such a varied move set! And the size difference between us was insurmountable! He was repeatedly swatting me like a fly, and each time, the dull pain pooling throughout my body grew worse...

“Hah! Not bad! You can spar pretty well for a runt! I can't get enough of this! Hahhh!”

His frenzied face twisted in gleeful abandon as he launched into yet another attack!

I kept countering with my very best punches, kicks, and Dragon Shots, but he didn't even flinch!

*“Your attacks are getting through to him, partner! But, well...this guy has always had a screw loose. He enjoys the pain!”*

*It's enough to freak you out, right Ddraig?!*

Only Sairaorg had ever been a match for this armor. No one else had been able to shake me like this, not even Cao Cao.

Just how powerful was this guy? A step above me, that was for sure. And more troublesome than Cao Cao, in his own way. After all, while Cao Cao could have killed me in one hit, this dragon could take any blow and keep laying into me with no end in sight.

However, I still hadn't boosted my powers to the max! I wasn't going to let him walk all over me!

After pausing to catch my breath, I charged forward once more, feinting and changing my trajectory midair, time and time again, as I closed in on the

dragon!

At the same instant, I gathered my dragon energy in my left gauntlet—into the dragon-slaying Ascalon!

No dragon could withstand that sword! If I could reach my target, victory would be mine! Hopefully!

Grendel breathed a fireball volley—three blasts in a row!

I dodged the first in midair, glided just inches above the floor to slip past the second, and as for the third fireball— “Gwa-ha-ha-ha! Let’s have at it, Ddraig! Haaah!”

Before I could pass the third fireball, the dragon raced overhead, raining down yet more blasts from above!

From the one direction, a wide-range bombardment, from the other, the third fireball from before was coursing my way!

Pouring all my strength into my right arm, I let loose with an oversize blast of my own! A Dragon Shot!

Ignoring the flames raining down from above, I crashed right through them to crush that dragon bastard!

After neutralizing an oncoming fireball with my Dragon Shot, I shot up into the sky. Immense heat scorched my body. If not for my armor, I would’ve been burned to ash in an instant!

*“That’s a lot more powerful than the Grendel I knew!”*

*Doesn’t matter, Ddraig! We’ve gotta break through!*

It was clear from his broad grin that Grendel was pleased to see us speeding through his volley.

“Seriously?! You’re awesome, Ddraig! There’s no beating a dumbass like you! Haaah!”

Once I was past the fire...

“This is for what your people did to my underclassmen!”

*“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”*

I drove my left fist, infused with the Ascalon's dragon-slaying energy, past Grendel's manic grin and into his abdomen, and at the same time, I enlarged my fist with a Solid Impact upgrade!

*"Solid Impact Booster!"*

*Thud!*

The low, dull sound of a heavy collision resonated throughout the battlefield!

Grendel fell flat to the floor after that direct hit, vomiting clumps of blue blood. Once more, the force of his body crashing down sent shockwaves vibrating all around.

After infusing the Ascalon's dragon-slaying aura into an attack, I had finally punched through his defenses. Now all I had to do was finish the job.

Any hope I had of a quick victory was quickly dashed when Grendel rose back to his feet. I couldn't believe my eyes.

He stopped to catch his breath, spat out another mouthful of blood, and cracked his neck. He was far from defeated.

I'd hit him with a Welsh Dragonic Rook punch bolstered with the dragon-slaying Ascalon, yet it hardly seemed to have affected him!

Grendel fixed me with a grotesque grin. "That one hurt like hell! But damn, what a punch! Gwa-ha-ha-ha! Awesome! This pain... This is what it means to feel alive! This is just the beginning, Ddraig! All right! Time for a bloodbath, a bloody showdown! You and me! Let's see who gets blown to smithereens and ends up six feet under! Haaah!"

He was tough! Without realizing it, I had broken out into a cold sweat.

This went beyond mere tenacity! What did I have to do to beat this guy?!

*"He's back onto his feet after all that? And with a laugh and grin? That deranged dragon!"* Ddraig spat out in disgust.

Grendel inflated his abdomen three times its usual size! Another powerful burst of fire would be coming my way! I readied my guard, but before he released his attack, Grendel spun around!

“Change of plans! How about I roast your friends?! Hahhh!”

Just like that, he unleashed a volley of fireballs straight for all the others!

Damn him! Wasn't this supposed to be a one-on-one duel?!

“Gah!” Rossweisse exclaimed, positioning herself in front of the group and summoning a multi-layered arrangement of defensive magic circles.

“I won't let you!” Akeno shouted, spreading her fallen angel wings and unleashing another one her lightning dragons.

“Water,” the chairwoman whispered. A quiet, yet immensely powerful, blue aura generated a barrier of water droplets all around her, which she promptly combined into a wall to shield her allies.

Whether by Rossweisse's magic squares or neutralized by Akeno's light dragon, Grendel's flames abated, while the burst of heat radiating from them was extinguished by Chairwoman Sona's water barrier!

Grendel wouldn't be denied, though, launching a pair of fireballs!

“Okay, let's do this! You too, Fafnir!” Saji cried, forming a magic array to envelop the first projectile. “Disperse!”

With that command, Vritra began to consume the fiery mass, eating it away bit by bit!

“Must protect Lil' Asia,” Fafnir said, unleashing a mass of golden aura from his mouth to completely obliterate the fireball Saji had managed to freeze in place.

Whoa! When those two Dragon Kings worked together, they made for an incredible combination!

Grateful though I was, I felt kind of guilty leaving Asia in Fafnir's hands!

Irina and Xenovia stepped in to deflect the second fireball.

“I'll cut you down with Durendal!”

The combined powers of Excalibur Rapid and Excalibur Destruction sliced the fireball clean in two! Without letting up, Xenovia turned her sword against the two remnants, shredding them into yet smaller pieces. However, that still wasn't enough to destroy the attack completely!



“I’ll finish it!”

As a finishing touch, Irina pulled out a ready-made Holy Demon Sword infused with ice magic to freeze the roiling flame in place.

In the end, Grendel’s fireballs were rendered inert! He may have taken everyone by surprise, but he’d failed to take them down!

And while everyone was okay, that dragon bastard’s actions were beyond cowardly. They were unforgiveable!

“Damn you! I thought you said this was one-on-one! What gives you the right to attack my friends?!” I howled, delivering another punch to Grendel’s face.

The dragon merely wiped the blood from his nose and twisted his lips in sadistic glee. “Sorry ’bout that. I just love killing stuff. I can’t keep the energy running without getting in a good old-fashioned hit. But I messed up this time. Your crew is tough as nails, huh...? I’m gonna whack ’em all! Gonna punch ’em! Beat ’em down! Stomp on ’em! Chew ’em up! And in the end, I’m gonna turn ’em all into ashes! Hahhh!”

This guy was out of his mind! His silver eyes glimmered with ferocious hostility and murderous intent, and all of it was directed at me and my friends!

“Hyoudou! There’s no need to fight him alone anymore! Let’s take him together!” the chairwoman said.

Right. Now that he’d broken the terms of the duel, we had no reason to abide by them. We could work together to beat him!

“Understood!”

Saying that was one thing, but my crimson armor was at its limit. Keeping its power going was already pretty difficult, and Ddraig had only been revived a few minutes ago. It was unlikely to last much longer!

“Let’s have us a second round, Red—no, Crimson Dragon Emperor! Hahhh!”

Just as Grendel spread his wings wide and took flight—his body stopped.

The cause was clear immediately, a black shadow had snagged him by one leg.

Caught off guard, I followed the shadow, the mass of raw darkness back to the source.

There, in the center of an eerie darkness, stood Gasper, his red eyes glowing with an unusual gleam, his body hunched forward.

The shadow seethed and swirled, billowing toward Grendel. Was this Gasper's hidden power? He was giving off a terrifying power. And still it continued to spread, threatening to swallow the artificial plane.

"The hell is that? Ah, I see. So you want me to kill that badly, huh? You got it! You're a bunch of strong little runts, huh? What a time to be alive! I'm gonna have fun wrecking you!"

Grendel took this latest development with sheer ecstasy! Damn him! How could he be such a battle maniac? There was no way I would let him lay a hand on our junior members!

Just as I thought to catch Grendel's attention and get him to continue focusing on me...

"...No, Grendel," the robed man interrupted. "Please stop there. The experiment has been a success. Ideally, Yuuto Kiba would've been here, too, but the information we've gleaned should suffice."

"Knock it off!" Grendel snorted irritably. "I'm just getting warmed up! Time for a killing spree! Now that I've got their attention, here comes the real deal! Let's go at each other! This is my chance to wipe the record clean! This time, dammit, I'll gorge myself to the fullest, devouring and being devoured, destroying and being destroyed, and bloody killing!"

He was out of control. Never had I expected to meet a dragon like this.

How could he be so bloodthirsty? Vali was like a tiny lamb by comparison! His hostility and violent obsession extended to everyone, friends and enemies alike.

"Do you wish to be made a corpse again?" the robed man replied coldly. "You are still in the adjustment phase. If you push yourself much further, well..."

Grendel clicked his tongue and lowered his fist. "Tch. Damn you. Using that as your shield, are you? Fine."

The dragon relaxed and dropped his battle stance.

What did the robed man mean by “made a corpse again” and “adjustment phase”? None of it made any sense.

At that moment, a communication magic square opened near the robed man’s ear. He leaned in for a moment, then nodded.

“Good news, Grendel. The team we sent against the White seems to be having a difficult time. We should go join them.”

“Oh-ho! Albion, huh?! Lemme at him!” Grendel roared with a manic grin.

Albion? The White? They meant Vali, right? Was that why Kuroka and Le Fay had disappeared earlier?

“Ddraig, you bastard, Vritra, you gloomy skunk, and Fafnir, you panties-obsessed psycho—this was just the warm-up.” Grendel pointed to each of us in turn. “Next time I see you, you’re dead. All three of you. Got that? Gwa-ha-ha-ha!”

With those parting words, the Dragon Gate reappeared, bathing Grendel in a deep green glow.

By the time the light subsided, the gargantuan dragon was nowhere to be seen.

Only then did the robed man lower his hood—revealing his young face and silver hair.

Why did his features strike me as familiar, like we’d met before? The face of the underworld’s strongest Queen flashed in the back of my mind.

“My name is Lucifugus,” he declared. “Euclid Lucifugus.”

—!

*L-L-Lucifugus...?! I-it can’t be!* No wonder he looked familiar—just like Grayfia!

“You’re not the boss, are you?” Saji asked. “Who’s been gathering the remnants of the Khaos Brigade back together?!”

The man—Euclid— narrowed his eyes. “You will know in due course.”

The chairwoman had paused at the sound of Euclid’s name. “I see. You’re the

one who infiltrated the city and brought in the stray mages. Your aura is similar enough to Grayfia's to slip through the wards without detection."

"Do pass along a message to my dear sister, who stooped so low as to become a mere servant to the House of Gremory," Euclid said coldly. "If she is permitted to abandon her responsibilities as a Lucifugus, then so am I."

*Sister? Th-then this man...*

Euclid Lucifugus vanished into a teleportation array.

A split second later, the edges of the battlefield began to collapse, the artificial plane having served its purpose.

Like pieces falling from a jigsaw puzzle, revealing the kaleidoscopic chaos of the dimensional void, the plane continued to unfold. We couldn't stay here.

After unleashing his hidden power, Gasper lay collapsed on the floor.

"We have to get out of here! Quickly!"

At Chairwoman Sona's command, Akeno deployed a magic array to take us all back to the underground train station. Carrying Gasper in my arms, I joined the others in the middle of the circle.

"At least let me do this much," Ravel muttered, forming a small magic circle at her fingertips and directing it to the incubation capsules.

With a soft burst of light, the machinery disappeared.

"Yes. I see." The chairwoman nodded, sending a spell of her own toward the equipment.

I couldn't gauge what they were doing exactly. My mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the silver-haired man, anyhow.

Grayfia's brother, and the return of a dragon long vanquished... What was the meaning of all this?

Grayfia? Sirzechs? Who knew what loomed on the horizon?

## New Life

It was almost sunrise.

We returned to the human world with the battle behind us, and Ravel, Koneko, and Gasper recovered safely.

After using my Gift technique to transfer power to my allies again and again, promoting to my True Queen state, and fighting Grendel, I was completely spent. Once Asia finished healing me, it took every ounce of strength I had left just to sit in a chair in the station's rest area.

The chairwoman had already left the station to report on the day's events to the alliance. Gasper had been taken for further medical treatment, accompanied by Asia and the others.

They'd assured me his condition wasn't life-threatening, but still... What exactly was that weird hidden power of his? And what in the world was happening to him?

And then there were Grendel's defenses. That last strike with my Dragon Slayer ought to have finished the fight.

"I have no idea what their 'experiment' was supposed to be, but Grendel withstood a Dragon Slayer... His defense is off the charts, there's no doubt about that," the chairwoman had said. "I suspect he's been augmented somehow. There's no other way he could've taken so little damage while Issei was equipped both with his crimson armor and the Ascalon."

Had he been granted some kind of resistance to Dragon Slayers? Was that even possible?

Now that Ddraig was back, I could try mixing my Dragon Blaster or Crimson Blaster techniques with the Ascalon's dragon-slaying aura, something Rias and

Kiba had suggested a while back. I was going to need some more powerful moves to defeat that vicious dragon next time.

I sighed. What was up with that laboratory? Supposedly, the whole Phoenix Tear thing was just a side operation. The real objective had been to pit us against Grendel...

And Grayfia's own brother had called that crazy dragon. There certainly was a family resemblance, and his aura was much the same as hers. No wonder he'd been able to infiltrate the town and let those mages in.

Ultimately, we'd failed to recover the tools the mages were using to manufacture their counterfeit Phoenix Tears, leaving us with no option but to attempt to extract more information from our captives.

All this had happened in Rias's absence. It was unbelievable. We still hadn't dealt with the vampire issue or our mage pacts, either...

That Khaos Brigade clearly had no intention of letting us rest.

I found myself staring up at the ceiling.

First Shalba, then Cao Cao...and now Lucifugus and a legendary dragon who was supposed to have been destroyed eons ago.

"Issei... I've brought tea." Ravel handed me a bottle of tea from a nearby vending machine.

Koneko was standing next to her.

I took the tea, and Ravel and Koneko sat themselves beside me.

It was Ravel who broke the brief silence. "I can't forgive them," she declared. Her gaze was so firm that it was hard to believe she'd been brought to tears by the sight of the so-called Factory not too long ago.

"Neither can I," I said, trying to reassure her.

"Me either. So be strong, Ravel." Koneko took her friend's hand and gave her a smile. Afterward, she stood to give Ravel and me some privacy.

"Issei? Can I tell you about something that happened a long time ago?" Ravel asked, blushing. "When I was a child, I was always fascinated by stories my

butler read to me about people going on heroic adventures. I always dreamed of becoming the kind of woman who could support men like that. But as I grew up, I must have let my dreams slip away..." She paused there, fixing me in her gaze. "But it's all coming back. When I saw how you fought Riser for the sake of the woman you love, it felt like my childish daydreams had come to life. Before I knew it, I wanted to know everything about you. So I did my research. You're impulsive, sex-obsessed, and extremely up-front about your own desires. But you're more passionate and considerate of your comrades than anyone else. You have a radiance that everyone in high-class demon society lacks."

I was...radiant?

"I want to watch over your dreams from beside you," she continued. "I know this dream is selfish... And I know I've been a bit of an inconvenience... But I was so happy to be appointed as your manager... I'd love to stay with you, if you'll have me..."

"I failed you, back at school...", I said, my fists quivering in frustration. I hadn't been able to save her at Kuou Academy.

Ravel shook her head. "You came to rescue me. You even fought against that massive dragon for me. I'm alive, because of you... I always believed in you." She took my hands in her own, flashing me the brightest of smiles. "I always knew my hero would come to my rescue. I couldn't have been happier. I just want you to know that..."

*Ravel...* There was no need to go that far.

I was grateful, truly. And I wanted her to stay with me. Nothing would make me happier than to keep her as my manager.

"...Ravel. I'm going to get even stronger... I've got plenty more to do. If it isn't too much to ask, I'd like for you to stick with me as my manager from now on."

"I'm excited to see what we can accomplish together!"

I couldn't have put it better myself. This young lady sure knew how to offer reassurance.

"Thanks. I know I'm not the brightest bulb in the box, so I'd really appreciate your help with things. First, we've got to take down those mages going after

your family! No one should be allowed to make a lab like that!”

“Right! I won’t let them get away with it!” Ravel paused to pull a piece of paper from her pocket. It was covered in diagrams of magic circles and mystic glyphs. “These were the symbols written on the capsules and equipment in that place, and these were the designs of the magic arrays they used to examine me. I double-checked with Koneko to make sure they’re accurate.”

Every last detail, even the magical runes within in the spells, had been meticulously recorded. Did Ravel memorize all that after just seeing them once?

She gave me a confident smile. “We’ve already shared this with the representatives from heaven and the underworld, and I’m going to send the information back home to my family, too. With this, we should be able to figure out what those mages are up to. We Phenexes will stop whatever they’re doing with their counterfeit Phoenix Tears! Also, some of the incubation capsules and other equipment might have ended up in the dimensional void after the artificial plane collapsed. Sona and I marked them before we left, so we’ll try delving through the void to see if we can pull up anything. We need to share what we know with the underworld’s investigation team, as well. It might take some time, but we need to gather every piece of information available... Those mages are finished! Laying hands on me will be the last mistake they ever make!”

So that’s what she and the chairwoman had done right before leaving. They’d left marks on that lab equipment to make sure they could find it again. Even in the midst of danger, those two always thought clearly!

What the Khaos Brigade and those stray mages still hadn’t realized was that this girl truly was an immortal phoenix.

Her spirit was strong, unflinching, and always bounced back.

All this experience did was make her stronger.

Shortly into our conversation, Riser arrived, dashing over.

“Ravel?!” he shouted. “Are you okay?! It took me a while to get here, but I’ve brought my Familia... H-huh? What?! It’s already over?!”

Apparently, he’d leaped into action the moment he received our report.



Yup, Ravel had a kind-hearted older brother!

## Romania

I—Azazel—had just crossed into vampire territory.

After arriving in Romania, we had rented a vehicle for the long, bumpy drive up into the mountains on unpaved roads.

The fog was so thick we could barely see where we were going, forcing us to rely on the map that the Carmilla vampires had given us upon arrival.

I'd have to separate from Rias and Kiba partway through the journey, since I was heading to speak with the Carmilla bloc leadership, while they were off to see the Vladis. Once I was finished with the Carmillas, I'd rendezvous with the others. I just hoped the situation didn't get out of hand and force us to call in Issei and the others.

I'd entrusted Fafnir to Asia, and I couldn't help but worry how they were faring. Even with Ophis's help, I'd never expected Asia to secure a contract with a Dragon King on her first attempt. Her talent with commanding monsters, specifically dragons, was honestly a bit frightening.

Rassei, Ophis, Fafnir. It was like Asia had been born with the innate ability to connect with dragons. Maybe it was fate that she bumped into Issei so soon after arriving in Japan.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, I saw Rias in deep thought.

"Are you worried about your boyfriend?" I called to her.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't... The girls all adore him, and they're much bolder than I am."

"Your future husband is gonna bring you a whole world of heartache, you know."

"I'm prepared for that. I love him, so I'll accept whatever comes."

Despite my gentle prodding, Rias's response was levelheaded. She'd already figured out how to keep her dignity as a principal wife, I guess. She didn't even flinch when I called Issei her future husband. No one could argue they weren't a perfect match.

"We'll be arriving at the meeting place in around fifteen minutes, I think." From the passenger seat, Kiba stared intently at a demon compass and the map spread on his legs.

"What happened to Cao Cao?" Rias asked all of a sudden. "You got a call about him the other day, right?"

That bastard Sakra had filled me in on developments last night.

"Sakra got his hands on Cao Cao, Georg, and Leonardo—the Hero Faction's Longinus members. Apparently, he confiscated the Holy Spear and sent the three of them down to Hades."

He hadn't returned the spear to us, though. No doubt he had decided to hold on to the Dimension Lost and the Annihilation Maker, too.

Now, it would look like *he* was the one who put an end to the Hero Faction, despite the fact that he had aided and abetted them only to stab them in the back and seize their Longinuses for himself.

*"Given that Sakra's the one who punished them, is it not inevitable that he would hold on to the Longinuses, at least temporarily?"*

So the excuse went. Pretty convenient. It was hard for anyone to speak up against that. Fortunately, we had captured Heracles and Jeanne ourselves, and they had spilled the beans on their connection with Sakra...but there was no telling how good it would be against that good-for-nothing Heavenly Emperor.

Damn him. Our young demons took them down!

He just snatched those beaten heroes at the last minute!

"He wanted to become raw poison, and now he's on his way to the netherworld..." Kiba muttered.

Sakra's voice echoed again in the back of my mind. *"Ha-ha-ha! That damn shaved head didn't know what the hell he wanted to be. He just kept runnin'*

*around like an idiot. If he wanted to be a badass and keep his humanity, he shouldn't have relied on that cheap Medusa's Eye shtick. He tried to fake being a half-assed hero, and it backfired big-time. In the end, that damn eye was his downfall. Hilarious, ain't it? Laugh it up. He's a frickin' clown."*

Sakra was right, of course. If Cao Cao had continued to fight as a normal human being, the Holy Spear would most likely have responded to his will and lent him its power.

The battle was over the moment the spear—the divine will of the biblical God—decided that the dreams of the Red Dragon Emperor, a demon and a dragon, were worth more than the ambitions of its host.

*"It takes a human hero to slay monsters. Some punk-ass kid who strays from his own humanity, who turns into a worthless scumbag, ain't gonna get anywhere."*

Right again.

But like Issei, Cao Cao still had youth on his side. Doubtless, that's why he had aspirations to make it in the world. I would bet my last two cents it was the Heavenly Emperor who had ignited that ambition in him.

Sakra had more to say during his call.

*"The way I see it, that Breast Dragon of yours actin' all heroic is some real bunk. What's the point of a demon playin' hero? Demons should be out manipulin' humans behind the scenes and takin' control. That's their true nature, right? No matter how many pretty words they throw around, those punk-ass demon kids you're hangin' with are just evil flunkies, using humans for their own gain. They ain't even close to bein' heroes. It's all just a game to them."*

I couldn't deny any of that.

However, demons and the underworld were changing. If they kept to their old ways, their society would inevitably collapse.

But if Sakra was inciting Cao Cao and his allies to play hero, then were my actions any different?

“What is Sakra hoping to achieve?” Rias asked. “He manipulated Cao Cao, indirectly provoked Hades, and sowed confusion among the various powers. Did you ask him what his true intentions are?”

“Yeah. He says he’s looking for someone who can stand up against Shiva, the god of destruction. He thinks chaos will breed stronger warriors.”

There was no telling whether there was any truth to that claim... But Indra would stop at nothing if it meant beating Shiva.

At that moment, a small magic circle for one-way communication appeared next to my ear. This wasn’t particularly unusual. I’d do the same to give a full-fledged report later.

—!

I could hardly believe my ears as the information poured in.

“Grendel... Lucifugus...?”

What the heck was going on over in Japan...? Had another incomprehensible confrontation occurred?!

And Grendel?! He was long dead! And I heard something about the Khaos Brigade, too!

Problems began buzzing around in my head.

A vampire in possession of the Holy Grail, stray mages, a reformed Khaos Brigade whose members kept showing up wherever Vali investigated, Lucifugus’s return, and the reappearance of a legendary dragon thought dead.

Could they all be connected? The timing was simply too coincidental.

If they *were* linked... Well, I’d be hard pressed to think of a more dangerous situation.

Euclid Lucifugus... I’d read about him once.

Grayfia’s younger brother was thought to have been a casualty of the demon civil war—the conflict between the old Demon King regime and anti-government forces, of which Sirzechs played a leading part. Euclid Lucifugus had simply vanished during the upheaval, presumed deceased. According to my

report, even Grayfia thought he was gone.

Yet he was back from the grave and had taken the helm of a terrorist organization...

No, even if he possessed the skill to manage the day-to-day activities of such a group, he lacked that certain something necessary to truly control a band of crazy outlaws—charisma.

The Kahos Brigade needed a boss worthy of the title, someone like Ophis.

Euclid was a Lucifugus, accustomed to serving those at the top since the very moment he entered this world. He didn't seem like the leader type.

So who had masterminded all this?

Who had managed to pull the Khaos Brigade back together in such a short period of time?

Did they create a new Ophis using the powers stolen from the real one? It was possible, but that would still demand someone with the strength to control her. Undoubtedly, *they* were the one behind the curtains.

Hades? Sakra? Unlikely. Zeus would banish the former once and for all if he caught him in another plot. As for the latter... Sakra's objective was solely to prepare for future conflict against Shiva.

Both stood to gain something from this but not enough to take direct control.

The Khaos Brigade was hated on all sides, yet continued to grow, to gather outcasts despised by all forces...

Whoever this leader was, they had to be an absolute powerhouse, a puppet, or some deranged lunatic.

I paused there, slapping my knee in an effort to clear my head.

The Khaos Brigade—an organization of terrorists dissatisfied with the current direction of the major pantheons.

Its bosses had changed multiple times, from Shalba Beelzebub of the old Demon King regime, to Cao Cao and his Hero Faction.

Against all odds, the organization survived the loss of Ophis...

No matter how many new faces it adopted, the Khaos Brigade would always stand in our path. And no matter how many times we beat it back, it found a new way to move forward.

We'd have to keep a close eye on events to come.

"Rias? Kiba? Something tells me we're going to have our hands full."

While driving through the dense fog that made it impossible to see more than a dozen meters ahead, I explained the recent events back in Japan and our possible responses.

## AFTERWORD

It's been a while. I was struck by a series of unfortunate events while writing this volume. First I caught a bad cold, which developed into pharyngitis, then I hit my shoulder on a train door, fracturing my collarbone. All that forced me to take a few weeks off for medical leave... It wasn't easy.

The fourth arc of *High School DxD* is now in full swing! Volume 14 serves as a new beginning of sorts, following the same erotic, action-packed manga style we're all used to.

Volume 12 was one massive raging battle, so I wanted to spend the first half of this one delving into our characters' daily lives and developing the broader setting, focusing on the usual fight scenes in the second half.

This fourth arc is all about mages and vampires. We hadn't explored either all that much, so I took the opportunity to explain them in more detail here.

Issei and his team suffered an unexpected attack at the very end, though. These new enemies look like they're going to be quite the headache. With their bosses being taken out over and over again, the Khaos Brigade has lost control over its people... You can expect to meet their new leader in the near future.

This time, the female members of the Gremory Familia took center stage, along with the Sitri Familia. The Occult Research Club wasn't able to play a huge role last time, and I also wanted them to team up with the Sitri Familia. This is the end result. I also thought it would be nice to see Sona in action as a King leading her forces, as we haven't seen much of her in a while.

We'll learn more about what Rias and Koneko have been getting up to in their training sessions in future installments. In this volume, they were both studying to learn new special moves, which I hope to unveil soon.

In this fourth arc of the narrative, I also want to focus on our other heroines who haven't received enough attention lately—Xenovia, Irina, Ravel, and



Rosswisse. We've already started with Ravel. It kind of ended with her and Issei making promises for the future, and I'm sure they'll be good partners for each other. She's a strong one, that's for sure.

I'm planning to give Xenovia and the others their own spotlights from here on out, but it's Gasper's turn next. Also, Kiba's last big showing was in Volume 3, and we can't keep neglecting him, so we'll bring him back soon as well.

Now, some miscellaneous matters.

The Sitri Familia has a couple of new members—a Rook and a Knight! Both are basically sub-characters like the rest of the student council, but they'll be showing up every now and then along with the others. As far as the Rook is concerned, you might be able to guess his true nature from his name.

Then we have Bennia, a cute little grim reaper goth kid! She may perhaps be inspired by a certain character from *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing*.

Allow me to take a moment to introduce the Sacred Gears from the Sitri Familia that didn't get a proper unveiling in the story. The Bishop Hanakai's is a barrier-type Sacred Gear called the Applause Wall which can quickly deploy wards and shields. Kusaka, the other Bishop, has the Scouting Persona, which is useful for gathering information and locating enemies. The Pawn Nimura, meanwhile, has the Procellarum Phantom, which can be used as a weapon in close-range battles. As these are all artificial Sacred Gears, Azazel came up with their names.

Near the end of the battle, Saji attached lines between Issei and the other members of the team. You may be wondering why the lines don't get tangled as everyone moves around the battlefield. Well, dear reader, my excuse is that they can come into contact without interfering with each other.

Our mighty panties-loving dragon, Fafnir, made his entrance! This Dragon King, who'd previously accompanied Azazel silently, has made a pact with Asia. When Azazel equips his golden armor in the anime, I'd appreciate it if you could refer to it as his "panties armor."

Then we come to Ophis, hiding in the closet as the Hyoudou household's mascot.

We learned that the former Dragon King, Tannin, is Mephisto Pheles's Queen. However, as his master doesn't show much interest in Evil Pieces or the Rating Game, he gives his Familia members free rein. I think it's pretty funny that a Dragon King is also a Queen.

No doubt all that Evil Dragon stuff may have struck you as something of an afterthought, but it was my attempt to bring in aspects of the broader setting that we haven't had a chance to delve into yet. I honestly didn't expect the series would last this long... Do rest assured that even if the Shiva arc doesn't pan out, I will at least wrap up this fourth arc properly. I've already decided how the story will finish. If we do get a chance to do the Shiva story, please think of it as a bonus storyline. How far we can take *DxD* will depend on your support, but I'm committed to moving forward with it.

I know I've gone a little overboard with the afterword this time, but I hope you're enjoying it.

Now for my thanks.

To Miyama-Zero and my editor, H, thank you, as always!

And now, a surprise! The anime adaptation has been renewed for a second season! The first season was received so warmly by fans old and new that we're gearing up for number two! Look forward to seeing Xenovia and Gasper make their first appearances!

The staff will be the same as the first season, so you know what to expect. I know it's a little presumptuous of me, but I'm taking part in meetings and consultations just like I did before. Coupled with everything else, it makes for a heavy workload. But I want to make this as great as possible for the fans!

Also, I hear Xenovia and company will be making an entrance in the manga soon. I hope you're looking forward to it.

Next up is a Gasper story! At least I hoped. However, we've decided to cover a few stories that haven't been talked about much in the main story. My editor and I thought it would be a good idea to set the stage a little and touch on them. Timing-wise, there's no better place to do it.

We're also planning a limited-edition release complete with a Blu-ray disc

featuring an exclusive fourteenth episode of the anime. Just like with the last special, this episode will be written by yours truly.

With all that said, I hope you're excited for the fourth arc of the story and the second season of the anime!

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