

High School

Box

DARK KNIGHT
OF SUNSHINE

15

ICHIEI
ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY
Miyama-Zero

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WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT



High school

DX

15

DARK KNIGHT
OF SUNSHINE



**As my senses
left me, a
crimson hue
entered what
little was left
of my vision.**

**As the world
blurred, I saw
her smile.**

**"What is it
you desire?"**





DARK KNIGHT OF SUNSHINE

15

ICHIEI ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY
MIYAMA-ZERO



New York

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Volume 15

Ichiei Ishibumi

Translation by Haydn Trowell

Cover art by Miyama-Zero

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At the time, I couldn't begin to understand what they meant by a different way of living...

Episode Issei.1

Several days had passed since the mage attack.

I—Issei Hyoudou—was in my room at home, looking over the list of candidates for a possible mage pact while waiting for an update on Rias's trip to Romania.

"...So you see, this one here... Well, that's how it is... If I might add something..."

Next to me, Ravel diligently explained the merits of each applicant while scanning the documents.

...I had a lot on my mind, to be honest, so most of what she said flew right over my head.

Word had reached us that the discussions with the Vlad family were going well, so I wasn't particularly worried about Rias. If anything happened, I would rush over immediately. No, the problem was Euclid Lucifugus, the mastermind behind the attack the other day...

Lucifugus. Yes, a supposedly deceased relative of Grayfia—her brother, in fact.

...Apparently, the higher-ups over in the demon world were in an uproar over his reappearance.

Well, that was understandable. Apart from Grayfia, he was the sole surviving member of the Lucifugus family, under the direct control of the former Lucifer.

We had heard that Grayfia herself was currently being held for questioning regarding Euclid's survival... In other words, the higher-ups suspected she may have helped fake his death.

...Sirzechs didn't suspect her, of course, but the same couldn't be said of the

other leaders. Concerned, they had opened this inquiry.

The upper echelons in the demon world were extremely sensitive about matters relating to the old demon kings. Anything connected to either the original or the current Lucifer was exceptional in one way or another.

Right. Vali, the White Dragon Emperor, was descended from the original Lucifer, while Sirzechs, the current Lucifer, was considered the strongest of all demons.

For there to be another surviving Lucifugus, one as close to the former Lucifer as Euclid was, and to hear that he was now aligned with the terrorist Khaos Brigade... Well, it was little wonder the higher-ups were in a frenzy.

Given the past civil war, the treatment of those aligned with the old demon king regime, and the recent anti-monster incident, it was clear that demon society was plagued with some very deep-rooted issues.

...Akeno had passed Euclid's message on to Grayfia, but judging by her panicked reaction, she hadn't expected it in the slightest. Like everyone else, she had assumed that her missing brother was long dead.

Why had Euclid decided to show up now? I didn't get the impression he shared the old demon king regime's way of thinking... No, he didn't give off anything remotely like the air of hatred and resentment that Shalba had exuded. His eyes were filled with ambition, not those of a person consumed by pent-up grudges.

So I pondered to myself, when Ravel addressed me with a dubious frown, "... Are you thinking about Lady Grayfia?"

She was a sharp one; that was for sure. She hadn't been my manager for long, but she could already tell what I was thinking merely by looking at my face.

...Or maybe I was just easy to read?

"How did you know?" I asked.

"I am your manager," she answered, puffing her chest out with pride.

Yep, she was equal parts terrifying and impressive. In a few years, she would no doubt be supervising my entire life, right down to the food I ate.

She breathed a long sigh. “Frankly speaking, this is a political matter. It isn’t the sort of thing we should get involved in. Still, everyone is highly sensitive when it comes to the old government, so I’m not surprised they’re so flustered.”

“Hmm. Right. I guess there’s no use worrying about it. At least not until there are more developments. Yep, let’s change the subject.”

Politics wasn’t my responsibility. I mean, the government did occasionally ask me to put on Breast Dragon performances and the like, but I was really just part of Rias Gremory’s Familia. My priority had to be her demon business. That being said, if Sirzechs called on us to fight for the underworld, we would, of course, oblige.

All right, time to switch gears! First things first, I needed to settle on a mage to be my partner!

Ravel seemed willing to reject this entire batch of candidates if none of them stood out. In other words, we would be moving to yet another round of applicants.

“What are your thoughts, Ravel?” I asked, gesturing to the documents.

Her cute face took on a stern cast. “I have to be honest... I’m starting to think we should move on to another round of applicants. Most of the individuals you’ve earmarked, Issei, don’t look all that promising to me... Of course, we won’t be able to assess anyone fully until they’ve gone through a post-document screening test, but I don’t get the impression any of these are really suitable partners for a Heavenly Dragon or the Red Dragon Emperor.”

She had put a lot of effort into screening each applicant, so her evaluation was no doubt on the mark. It seemed she had an unusually favorable opinion of me, which made her incredibly strict about saddling me with the right long-term partner.

For my part, I had looked through the various applications as well, but none of them seemed to fully fit the bill. That being said, there were a couple of cool mages and temptingly sexy witches!

When it came to short-term contracts, on the other hand (from several

months to a year), there were a few I was interested in considering. Ravel was well aware of this.

Indeed, several other members of the Gremory Familia were actively considering entering into short-term contracts.

The logic went that short-term contracts were a good way to familiarize yourself with mage pacts. And from the mage's perspective, they could also be highly profitable.

"Hmm. Maybe I should go for a short-term one, after all?" I asked Ravel, head cocked to one side.

She didn't object outright, but her cute face wore a troubled look. "...That isn't without its own risks. If we enter into a short-term agreement only to make a rookie mistake, it could give you a bad industry reputation. As your manager, I would hate it if you didn't have any potential partners to choose from next time around."

She was thinking far ahead... But yeah, I *was* scared of making some careless blunder... I was doing my best to take everything seriously, but I slipped up way more than Rias or Kiba or the others.

On top of that, I had my doubts about a few more basic points. There was nothing for it but to ask Ravel about them. I had been leaving a whole lot of decisions up to her lately, so there were still areas I wasn't particularly sure about.

""*Hmm...,"*" we murmured in unison—when the door suddenly swung open, and in strode Akeno bringing us both tea.

"Oh dear. How are we progressing?"

"Thanks... Huh?!"

I startled at the sight of the figure standing behind her.

"Excuse me."

It was Chairwoman Sona! Whoa! Now *this* was unusual!

"Chairwoman! What's up?"

The chairwoman adjusted the tilt of her glasses. Ah, she looked cute today in her casual winter clothes—a light blue blouse and denim pants, and a navy blue coat held over one arm.

She and Akeno sat down atop a pair of cushions on the carpet across from Ravel and me.

“I’m here to discuss our next actions with Akeno and the others. Tsubaki will be joining us later. Sorry for intruding, but I’d like to have a quick talk if you don’t mind.”

So the vice-chairwoman was coming, too? It felt kind of refreshing to have guests from a different Familia dropping by!

“Pardon me for dropping in.”

That voice came from the ceiling! Sure enough, I watched as a magic square unfolded and a petite Grim Reaper poked her head out upside down! Yep, it was Bennia, the Sitri Familia’s newest member!

Whoa! In her skull mask, she gave off a weird horror vibe!

“My apologies, Issei. She insisted on paying a visit to your house, so I had to bring her with me.”

The next moment, the Grim Reaper girl leaped gracefully down from the ceiling to seat herself beside the apologetic chairwoman.

“This is the Breast Dragon’s house... As far as I’m concerned, it’s like paradise on earth.”

Bennia’s eyes positively sparkled as she took in the room.

Well, for what it was worth, I had no problem whatsoever with anyone from the Sitri Familia paying a visit!

“No worries,” I said, flashing the chairwoman a smile. “Feel free to stop by whenever you want! Uh, not that I’m in charge or anything, though.”

My father was ostensibly the owner of the house...but lately, it seemed to be Rias calling all the shots. I mean, she did expand the building, after all!

...After a moment, the chairwoman’s gaze shifted to the documents Ravel and

I had laid out across the floor.

“The members of my Familia are still making their selections as well. I’m sure everyone except for me and Tsubaki are still busy deliberating. I provide them with advice, but I try to let them make their own decisions wherever possible.”

So Saji and the others hadn’t decided, either. They did tend to be more independent than us in the Gremory Familia.

Right, this was perfect timing—I could ask the chairwoman a question that had been on my mind for a while now.

“By the way...what’s the biggest advantage to signing up with a mage?”

It was a foundational question, one that I should have asked at the very beginning of this process. I had missed my chance, however, and I had been just about to ask Ravel before our visitors dropped in.

For a mage, a demon pact had all sorts of advantages. But was there anything in it for us, or was this all just some long-standing tradition?

That was what I wanted to know. If making money was all that mattered, it didn’t sound much different from our regular work.

The chairwoman sipped the cup of tea Akeno offered her before responding, “The results of magical research.”

Magic, huh?

The chairwoman continued, “We demons possess our own unique demon powers, which humans have adapted into magic through careful analysis and research. Yes, there is a wide variety of other types of powers and abilities, such as elemental magic or Norse magic, some of which are said to have been created by gods. The majority of magic used by practitioners, however, is said to follow in the footsteps of the great mage Merlin Ambrosius.”

Yep, I had heard this before.

“Magic, as such, has long since diverged from our demonic powers and become its own school of practice, giving rise to abilities demons cannot possess. Even now, it continues to evolve and expand into uncharted territory. It has the potential to contribute greatly to the underworld’s technological

advancement.”

Ah. Come to think about it, MacGregor Mathers in Sirzechs's Familia was also conducting research on magic in the underworld.

The chairwoman pointed at her glasses. “These glasses are actually specially crafted through the study of magic. They don’t possess a huge amount of power, but...”

Why hadn’t I heard this before?! So those weren’t just any old glasses...?

“Even if not considered particularly useful in human terms, certain forms of magic possess revolutionary properties for us demons. So these pacts can be a very valuable trade. You might say we’re buying the mages’ talents, an up-front investment of sorts. *That’s* why the selection process must be done properly. Mistakes can be incredibly costly.”

Basically, a mage’s personal research could be beneficial to us as well. Now that I stopped to think about it, it seemed almost karmic bringing magic born from analyzing our demon powers back to the underworld.

“But never forget,” the chairwoman continued, raising a finger into the air, “a mage pact is just one aspect of life as a demon. It isn’t everything. If you want to succeed, there are contracts with regular humans, mage pacts, rating games, business in the underworld, and more to consider.”

...She was right, of course. For a demon, mastering just one domain wouldn’t be enough. Only by succeeding in several areas at the same time could you advance to a high-class level.

I remembered what Kiba’s master had said the other day—the more goals a reincarnated demon had, the better. If you wanted to live a long life, you needed to stretch yourself.

...B-but how were you supposed to come up with a thousand-year life plan? A yearly schedule for the next ten thousand years? Talk about daunting...

W-well, there was no need to rush. I would just have to talk it over with Rias and Ravel.

Anyway, back to the chairwoman. It wasn’t every day she stopped by.

"So, er. This is your third time coming here...?" I asked.

"Indeed. The first time, I played video games with you and others. The second was, well, because of my sister..."

Right, right, I remembered. I had been playing a video game with Asia, Xenovia, and Irina when Rias, Akeno, and the chairwoman popped up and we had an impromptu tournament.

The chairwoman had been incredible! It was her first time playing, yet she mastered the controls in no time and completely crushed me!

Losing at my favorite racing game, I thought I would end up trailing behind her for the rest of my life.

The second time she dropped by...was for *that*. Yes, a very serious incident.

All of a sudden, Akeno let out a small laugh.

"What's wrong, Akeno?" the chairwoman asked with a puzzled look.

"Oh-ho. I was just thinking about all the trouble we had with those mages, and Lady Serafall's audition..."

At this, the chairwoman's face instantly flushed red.

Yes. *That*. It all came flooding back with this latest turn of the conversation...

It all happened just before the school trip...

Life.1

Magical Girl Ria (Seriously?!)

“I’m Magical Girl Ria! Evil villains won’t stand a chance against my sparkling magic! Hee-hee!”

In front of me stood a crimson-haired young lady striking a cute pose dressed as a magical girl.

And by crimson-haired young lady, I meant President Rias.

Usually so elegant and noble, she was now in a magical girl cosplay outfit, her crimson hair tied in twin tails, while she lofted a (toy) magic wand into the air with one hand.

If you asked me, the combination totally worked! Though a third party might consider her a little old to be dressed up as a magical girl. Even as a member of her Familia, I had to admit people might think it a bit of a stretch.

But still... Just being able to witness this sight... The prez sporting a magical girl costume... I was content.

There was, naturally, a reason why this third-year high school student had decided to wear such a pretty costume.

It all started a couple of days earlier...

An unusual pair decided to drop by my house on a day that I didn’t have school. The first was the head of Kuou Academy’s student council, Chairwoman Sona. The second was—

“I want to be in the new *Magical Girl Milky* movie!”

Yes, it was one of the Four Great Demon Kings—Serafall Leviathan.

...Right from the start, I had a bad feeling about this visit. Though I had to admit, that *was* the sort of thing Leviathan might be expected to come out with.

And so, we received our visitors in the VIP room on the top floor of the Hyoudou residence...

"...So you're auditioning for a magical girl role...?" the prez asked, seemingly at a loss for any other response.

Leviathan gave her a deep nod, twirling her wand in one hand as she raised it up toward the ceiling. "Exactly! It's for a live-action movie adaptation of *Magical Girl Milky!* They're not just looking at celebrities this time around—they've widened their net to include the general public as well! If I pass, I could get the lead role!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling as she beamed us a dazzling smile.

...She sure did love all things magical-girl-related.

She was particularly enamored with the *Magical Girl Milky* series, an animated television program popular in the human world, and she dressed up in magical girl outfits even in her daily life.

She was super gorgeous, so to say she looked good in it would be the understatement of the century. But coupled with her innocent personality, those outfits tended to leave everyone around her unsure how to react.

Personally, I thought of her as the Demon King Magical Girl, because when you put all the pieces together, that was precisely what she was...

She was such an adoring fan that she produced her own television program in the underworld, *Magical Girl Leviatan*, in which she had the leading role.

Not too long ago, she had even made all of us play bad guys in a film version of it...

...W-well, Gasper had played one hell of a cardboard box vampire god in it, but still...

...Anyway, was she saying she wanted to star in a magical girl production here in the human world as well...? Her admiration for the genre was certainly intense.

Sitting next to her, Leviathan's younger sister—that is, Chairwoman Sona—blushed scarlet. "...I'm really sorry she's like this..."

...The situation couldn't be easy for her, either, huh?

The Four Great Demon Kings were all freewheeling and eccentric, though their close associates tended to be comparatively serious in character. That also applied to Sirzechs and his people...

"S-so why are you coming to us?" I asked.

I understood she wanted to land the leading role in this movie, but why bring Chairwoman Sona to our place?

"That's the thing. You see—"

No sooner had Leviathan winked back at us and launched into an explanation than Chairwoman Sona intervened: "Please don't say anything, Sister...Rias. Would you help audition for the role with me?"

I watched as the chairwoman's face turned as red as a fully ripe tomato.

As for the prez—she was left momentarily speechless, her mouth agape. No doubt she had never even dreamed her best friend might come out with such a request.

After a long pause: "U-um... Wh-what do you mean, Sona...?" she asked with a forced smile.

And so Chairwoman Sona explained the situation in detail.

Basically, when the demon king Leviathan learned that a human film studio was seeking auditions for a live-action adaptation of *Magical Girl Milky*, she begged her younger sister, Chairwoman Sona, to use the small amount of time she had away from school and study to take part.

Despite the chairwoman's every attempt to calm her sister's passions, Leviathan remained resolute (she may have even thrown a tantrum), and it seemed that her behavior was starting to affect her official duties. As such, it was agreed that, with the chairwoman and the Sitri Familia's protection (or rather, their oversight), she would be permitted to try her luck.

Leviathan was a super-important VIP, so it was only natural she needed people protecting her up here in the human world—and that responsibility had fallen on her sister, Chairwoman Sona.

That much I understood. But why come to the prez asking her to join in on the audition? From what I gathered, this had nothing at all to do with us. But then the chairwoman pulled a certain something out of her bag—a flashy, frilly piece of clothing. No matter how you looked at it, it was cosplay.

“...M-my sister prepared this for me...,” the chairwoman murmured, fighting to endure her shame. “It’s for the audition... A magical girl outfit...”

Whoa! A cosplay outfit for the chairwoman?! Just imagining her in that thing had my mind setting sail for uncharted territory!

“...My Familia will protect her during the audition,” the chairwoman continued. “Inevitably, this means we’ll need to stick close to her... Which is why I’m forced to take part along with her...,” she stammered, her whole body shaking with emotion.

A-ah, she was auditioning so she could keep a close eye on her sister! For the coolheaded chairwoman, a magical girl audition must have been an extremely unfamiliar world. In fact, it was probably near the bottom of her list of things she wanted to do in life. The fact that she had agreed to go through with it spoke volumes about her determination!

It was all to take care of her sister! No, to be her guardian and protector!

“By the way, we’ve heard rumors that rogue mages expelled from the Council of Mages have been targeting Lady Serafall,” Akeno said.

Huh. That came as news to me. So that terrorist group had set its sights on Leviathan now? Well, that wasn’t too surprising, seeing as she was a prominent demon king—but why were mages, specifically, chasing after her?

“Why?” I asked.

“...From what I hear, real mages—witches in particular—despise her hobby,” Chairwoman Sona explained. “In short, they’re probably worried she risks distorting society’s perception of magic users. Seeing her in this state, that’s quite understandable...”

Ah. So real mages—or rather, witches—found it extremely vexing when one of the four demon kings went about dressed up as some fanciful misrepresentation. Heck, depending on how you looked at it, they probably

even regarded her conduct as an insult.

After all, she was a major demon king. She could be fascinated with magical girls all she wanted, even going so far as to produce her own television series featuring them—but she couldn’t possibly fathom the challenges real witches faced day in and day out. At the same time, though, I thought they were being a little oversensitive.

The chairwoman breathed a heavy sigh. “Our job is to protect her if those mages decide to attack the audition venue. That being said, I don’t think they would be able to actually harm her if they did... The problem is they could cause all sorts of damage in the human world if either party went on a rampage. We have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

R-right, that was a distinct possibility... If Serafall wanted, she could annihilate an entire island with a single attack. It would be a huge problem if the underworld’s lead diplomatic envoy started redrawing the map of the human world.

Leviathan, her eyes glistening with tears of thanks, reached out to hug her devoted sister. “Ugh! You’re so thoughtful, So-tan! Not only are you worried about me, you’ll take part in the audition, too! I’m so moved!”

“...In that case, you can always withdraw from it.”

“I can’t do that,” Serafall answered with a wink as she struck a cute pose. “I’ve prepared a costume for you, too. Let’s both be magical girls!”

She was bursting with excitement for this, absolutely thrilled about this opportunity to dress her younger sister up in a magical girl costume!

“S-so you’re saying you want *me* to join you?” the prez asked again.

“Rias,” Chairwoman Sona said, taking her hand in her own. “Please. I’m so embarrassed... I’m begging you, come to the audition with me. I can’t bear to go alone...! You’re my friend. You’re the only one I can ask... If we go together, I think I can pull through...!” she pleaded, confiding in her best friend.

Ah, so this was one of those stories where you brought along a friend to support you through an embarrassing ordeal.

The prez closed her eyes for a long moment, took a deep breath, then tightened her grip on the chairwoman's hand. "Sona. We've been friends since we were little. All right, I'll join you. And I'll help deal with any terrorists that pop up, so don't you worry."

"...Rias. Thank you..."

The prez and the chairwoman stared into each other's eyes! Even the usually coolheaded chairwoman was on the verge of tears! Whoa! It sure was good they were such dependable friends!

Ah, I felt like I was witnessing a beautiful relationship here!

"It's like So-tan and Rias's *yuri* love story!" Leviathan exclaimed, getting incredibly worked up for some reason.

It was probably about time she pulled herself together, if you asked me...

"...So does that mean we're all going to the audition site?" I asked.

"...Indeed," Koneko answered from atop my lap, when—

"I prepared a costume for you, too, Rias! Look! The ribbon is so cute!"

Leviathan pulled out a flashy outfit for the prez, whose face turned instantly grim.

"...I—I guess I'll have to wear that..." she murmured.

"...Sorry again for having a sister like this, Rias."

"It's okay. I've known what she's like since forever... But that costume..."

Both the chairwoman and the prez heaved exasperated sighs at Leviathan's show of enthusiasm.

"Won't there be a paper screening first, though?" I asked. "In that case, isn't this jumping the gun a little—"

"Ta-dah!" Leviathan interrupted, pulling out a stack of documents. "I've already sent in applications for So-tan and her girls, and for Rias and your girls as well! You're all so cute, so you've already passed the screening process!"

...Was this being well prepared, or had she already dragged us into this before even telling us?! She clearly had a good handle on both her sister and the prez if

she knew they would agree to this ahead of time. Did that mean we were all at her mercy now?

And so we found ourselves going along with Leviathan's request.

-○●○-

The day of the audition soon rolled around.

We members of the Gremory and Sitri Familias assembled in a high-rise building in the middle of the city.

A great many girls were attending the audition in the large venue hall, all wearing name tags with their assigned audition number in large digits. From what I heard, there were close to two hundred of them. Did that mean they had all passed the document screening? Just how many people applied for this role...? *Magical Girl Milky* sure was popular...

If I had to guess, most of the participants would have probably been around upper elementary to junior high school age.

"...Most of the girls trying their luck here should be in their early teens, since that's around the age Milky herself is supposed to be... I'm not sure what the plan is for the live-action movie, though..." Koneko murmured.

Incidentally, not only was she in her own magical girl costume, but she was letting her cat ears and tail stick out, too.

Huh. When you heard the term *magical girl*, you did tend to think of girls around that age. In fact, I had watched *Milky* myself on several occasions, and I knew for a fact that the protagonist was supposed to be a junior high school student.

But Koneko here—she was so adorable! As a magical girl with cat ears, she was so cute, I could have fallen head over heels in love with her! Though if I spoke my thoughts out loud, she would probably punch me in the face from embarrassment, so I maintained my silence.

Whoa! I spotted a couple of famous child actors in the hall as well! It should go without saying, seeing as they passed the document screening, but they were all cute as well...

The girls, I noticed, were fixing us with strange glances. Some I even

overheard chuckling under their breath. The reason was simple.

"...I'm caught in a battle against myself," the prez, dressed in a frilly magical girl outfit, muttered as she endured her humiliation.

The prez in a magical girl costume, with her long crimson hair tied in twin tails with a cute ribbon!

She was super cute! At least I thought so...but compared to the other applicants, she did look a little older. It was a bit of a stretch to imagine someone in their third year of high school as a magical girl, and her outfit also gave off a slightly outdated vibe.

Her ample breasts only added to that sense of dissonance. After all, when you thought of magical girls, you tended to imagine mostly flat-chested girls...

B-but even so, I couldn't help feeling moved by this sight of the prez in her magical girl outfit! It was perfectly fine, a high school senior dressing up this way! Perfectly fine!

Actually, the curious looks being directed her way were probably less due to her age and more because of the way she was wearing the costume.

The other applicants were all dressed in relatively normal clothes, albeit cute ones! The only ones cosplaying in magical girl outfits were Leviathan, the prez, and Chairwoman Sona! That's right, they were already standing out! Heck, their true enthusiasm levels aside, they looked like overly devoted fans of the genre!

"Well, give it your all today, Rias. Oh-ho," said Akeno in shrine maiden attire, cheering the prez on from the sidelines.

She was enjoying this, wasn't she?

Unlike her usual shrine maiden outfits, today's costume had a very distinctive design. Apparently, Leviathan had crafted it to be a traditional Japanese-style magical girl costume. It had a rather small coverage area, with short hakama and leaving the chest area partly open. She was even holding a zigzag paper streamer, like the ones used in purification rituals!

Akeno's outfit was definitely sexy! And it looked really good on her!

"...If my parents saw me like this, the only path left open to me would be

death..." Chairwoman Sona stammered, trembling all over as she entered the hall after changing into her own magical girl costume.

She had a huge ribbon tied at her chest! It was a super-cute look, a far cry from her usual levelheaded image.

"Gah!"

Next to me, Saji fell to the ground with a sudden nosebleed!

"What's wrong, Saji?!" I asked, holding him in my arms.

He looked to be on the verge of hyperventilating, yet his lips were pulled up in a joyous smile. "...Haa-haa... The ch-chairwoman...as a magical girl... She's so cute... H-Hyoudou... If I died now, I'd die happy..."

The chairwoman's new look must have scored a critical hit on the lovelorn Saji!

"Pull yourself together! What good will it do to die here?! You'd miss the audition proper!"

"...D-did you see...? Sh-she's wearing glasses... It's like she's coming to kill me with pinpoint accuracy... I know it isn't realistic, a high schooler as a magical girl... But damn if that isn't a magical, radical critical hit...!"

"Since when were you into girls with glasses?! N-no, that's not important right now! What's the point of dying here?! Seeing the prez dressed up like that, enduring this humiliation—this sight will give me strength for years! So get up, buddy! The battle's just beginning!"

"...Sorry for wearing this thing at my age," the prez said, smacking me over the head.

Ugh! Was she listening?! But I thought it was a wonderful look!

"Good grief," I heard Kiba mutter behind a wry smile.

Damn him! The girls in the hall were already giving him sultry looks, crying out in shrill voices with comments like "He's so cool!" and "Is he a celebrity?!"

"Hmm. I wonder if this would be easy to move around in."

"I don't know... An angel as a witch...?"

"They're magical girls, Irina. Still, this is kinda embarrassing..."

Next up was our Church Trio—Xenovia, Irina, and Asia—in their own magical girl costumes! Xenovia was holding a replica sword and had a lovely ribbon tied above her head. And in addition to her costume, Irina had activated her angel halo and white wings.

Then there was Asia! Hers was a frilly pink costume with a small dragon—Rassei—perched on her shoulder (as far as anyone else was concerned, he was just an elaborate plush toy). She was also holding a wand in one hand! Yep, she was a bona fide magical girl, all right! And with her green eyes and blond hair, she was automatically the top of her class!

"...I should have known Koneko and Asia would be able to pull it off," came Rossweisse's voice.

When I turned around, there she was in a full set of Valkyrie armor.

"You aren't wearing a magical girl costume?" I asked.

Rossweisse breathed a sigh. "If I have to wear something, I'd rather stick to what I'm used to... But it wouldn't be fair if I was the only one in regular clothes. Sorry."

Ah. So as a magic user herself, she chose proper equipment over a magical girl costume. She looked so stalwart! Way to go!

"I-Issei..." came Gasper's voice from behind.

When I turned around, there he was—a junior high school boy looking all fidgety dressed as a magical girl!

Heeey! What was *he* doing sporting that look?! I mean, I knew he was into cross-dressing, but still!

"...L-Lady Leviathan submitted an application for me as well...," he said, his face turning bright red. "I—I heard it was accepted..."

Seriously?! He passed the document screening?! Hmm... I mean, he was technically a guy... Was this really okay? Did he lie about his gender or something? It was frankly scary how well he passed as a girl. I mean, he was a picture-perfect beauty, and he did look completely at home in the magical girl

outfit! Damn it, Gaspy!

...Geez. Was everyone except Kiba and me taking part in this thing?

“...As the Sitri Familia’s Queen, I can’t believe I’m doing this... It’s s-so embarrassing! Ugh! A-and Kiba’s watching...!”

“I-it’s all for the chairwoman!”

“I wouldn’t do it for any other reason...”

To the side, the female members of the Sitri Familia, having likewise changed into their own outfits, gathered around the chairwoman and Saji. Damn it, Saji... He was literally surrounded by gorgeous beauties there... Life sure must have been nice for him.

But while I was busy taking in the sight of my friends—

“...Mr. Demon?”

...A deep, familiar voice was thrown my way... Uh-oh...

Overcome with trepidation, I turned my gaze around, when—

“What a coincidence, finding you here!”

...

Laying eyes on the heavyset man—or rather, magical girl—I was left utterly speechless.

Arms as thick as tree trunks, an impressively toned chest that threatened to burst through the obviously ill-fitting costume, legs wider than a woman’s waist sticking out from beneath a frilly skirt...and cat ears?!

Even his fingers were massive, making the wand he was holding look like a toothpick.

His chiseled jaw flexed into a smile. “It’s me, Mil-tan. I’m here to be Milky.”

...Mil-tan?!

What was *he* doing here?! No, wait! Deep down, he was a purehearted maiden who wanted nothing more than to be a magical girl! No wonder he was here...

Still, this was insane!

I clutched my head in my hands, staring up into the heavens! Could this be any more absurd?! The studio *did* do a document screening, right?! Didn't they look at the included photograph or his personal history?!

How did his application get through?! He wasn't even a girl! Just look at that muscle mass! He was an incredibly manly man! Why would they let someone who looked so dangerous through?! *This* wasn't magic!

"...E-er, are you here for the right audition?" I asked. "It isn't a martial arts film, I don't think..."

But Mil-tan's rugged features merely smiled back at me. "What are you talking about, Mr. Demon? Mil-tan came here to be a magical girl."

"I mean, wouldn't you be better as a physique-based character...?"

Sorry, but I wasn't looking for a magical girl who specialized in physical attacks! Something had to be off about this movie's audition criteria!

At that moment, the venue hall erupted into a stir. It seemed the staff from the film studio had arrived.

"All right, all right, everyone. Thanks for coming in today," said a man dressed like an industry professional from decades ago, complete with a sweater draped over his shoulders.

...Was he the producer?

Next to him were two more men—a slightly intimidating fellow sporting a hat, sunglasses, and a goatee, and a thin man with longish hair.

The first, presumably the producer, picked up a microphone to address the crowd. "*I'm Sakai, the producer of Magical Girl Milky The Movie. Next to me in the hat is Touyama, the director, and that man over there, with the long hair, is the screenwriter, Shiyouji!*"

"..."

"Hi."

The director maintained his silence while the screenwriter gave a casual

greeting.

“Look, look, Sona! That’s Touyama! He’s behind so many magical girl shows! And Shiyouji’s involved, too! I’ve never seen them in person before!”

Leviathan looked like she was having the time of her life. The two figures, it seemed, were somewhat famous in the magical girl industry.

“Together with Touyama and Shiyouji, I’d like to select our cast members today,” the producer continued. *“So let’s get started!”*

S-so these three were the most important stakeholders during the audition process?

“Yes!” the girls gathered in the hall responded as one.

The director wrinkled his brow, staring sternly across at the girls. Finally, he nodded several times and called the producer over to whisper something in his ear.

“Hmm. Yes. I see, I see.” The producer nodded as he checked a few documents—then looked straight across at the prez and the chairwoman. After loudly clearing his throat, he called out, “Um, I know this is fast, but we’re ready to announce the results for the first round of the selection process.”

Huuuh?! Already?! That was quick!

“Eh?!” the girls cried out in astonishment.

Of course they were shocked! This was just too sudden!

The producer, at the director’s urging, read out several names: “...Rias Gremory, Sona Sitri, Asia Argento...”

The group selected to move on to the next round included the prez, the chairwoman, the girls from the Gremory Familia along with Irina, the girls from the Sitri Familia, Leviathan, and—

“...and Mil-tan.”

Even Mil-tan made it through?! What was going on here?!

“Those whose names I just called out have passed the first round of the audition. The director places great value on his gut feeling, so I’m sorry, but that

concludes this first part!"

"Eeeh?!" the remaining girls cried out in shock.

"In those outfits?!"

Likewise, the prez and the chairwoman were so taken aback that their eyes could have popped from their sockets.

"Well, with these costumes, I'm guessing Leviathan and the rest of us will all be eliminated from the running pretty early," the prez had confided in me before coming here today. *"The selection process definitely isn't going to be easy."*

...T-to think their cosplay outfits had actually helped them pass with flying colors...

"Yippee! I knew they would get it!" Leviathan exclaimed.

No matter how you looked at it, this was a shocking development! M-maybe this wasn't a normal selection process after all...?

...And so began the audition, with more twists and turns yet to come.

-○●○-

The second round was held in a different location, in a large open floor space. The girls had all gone inside, so Kiba, Saji, and I opened the door slightly to take a peek.

Okay, let's see... There were the three panel judges and several staff members at a long table, while the remaining participants sat in rows across from them.

There were around thirty entrants remaining, including the Gremory and Sitri Familias, Leviathan, and Mil-tan... Basically, more than half were dressed as magical girls.

"Um, congratulations on making it this far," the producer said. "The reason you all passed the first round was that your general attitude matched our concept for the film. Isn't that right, Shiyouji?"

"Precisely," the screenwriter answered pretentiously, brushing a hand through his hair to push out of his face. "Director Touyama and I want to make a Milky film unlike anything audiences have seen before. We aren't

looking for an ordinary cast. We want something more extreme, brilliant even, unrivaled talents to help us create a *new* Magical Girl Milky. Isn't that right?"

This time, it was the director's turn. He crossed his arms with a dour look, then pursed his lips behind his goatee. "Nice!"

...Th-that was it? It didn't even make any sense. Either way, though, the second round was getting underway. It seemed to be a self-introduction of sorts—kind of like in a job interview.

The first girl called up stood in front of the studio staff and introduced herself while answering the panel's questions.

The normal girls introduced themselves, then the Sitri Familia, until it was time for our own Familia plus Irina...

Producer: What are your special skills?

Xenovia: Exorcising and killing demons. I'm a confident swordswoman.

Director: Nice!

Producer: What made you want to be a magical girl?

Rossweisse: You're asking why I learned magic? All right. Well, it was a good way for me to get work in Valhalla, and since magic is essentially a status symbol there, it was a compulsory subject in my studies. I started with Norse-style magic, but recently I've been dabbling in black magic, white magic, and summoning magic as well. I'm quite capable, as it turns out.

Screenwriter: You've really embodied the character you've created, even down to the armor. Yep, you've made the role your own there. Mm-hmm.

Producer: Angel wings and a halo! It's not every day you come across an angelic magical girl.

Irina: Actually, I *am* an angel.

Producer: Oh! So you're confident enough to actually call yourself that?!

Irina: No. I really am an angel. See here, this letter A on the back of my hand? This means I'm Archangel Michael's ace. You know, *the* Archangel Michael? Up in Heaven?

Director: Nice!

...Th-this was crazy! The panel was just going to think our girls were out of their minds! Or so I thought, but judging by their responses, the director and the others seemed equally insane!

I mean, they were supposed to keep all that a secret from the public! N-not that the panel members seemed to actually believe them, but still! Anyway, I couldn't help but think the girls were acting a bit strange today!

"We have a very unique group of girls here, don't we?"

"Nice!"

The producer and the director both seemed to be enjoying themselves! What kind of film studio was this?!

Akeno, Asia, and Koneko managed to come out with normal enough responses, at least...

Then it was time for Leviathan's turn.

Standing in front of the panel, she spun around cutely and fixed them all with an adorable wink. "I'm Levia-tan! I *love* Milky, so I just had to come today! Nice to meet you all! Peace!"

"I see. Yes, your application conveyed an extraordinary degree of emotion."

"Yep, that's right, Mr. Producer! I first saw Milky back when..."

And so, with a sparkle in her eyes, Leviathan began to speak of Milky's greatness like an innocent fan girl.

From what I gathered, Leviathan was actually talking about a piece of fan fiction, but the director and the screenwriter were listening with great interest all the same... Leviathan looked to be having fun, too, so it was probably okay.

Her direct appeal, I felt, certainly ended on a positive note.

"Next—Mil-tan."

...

No sooner had the producer called out his name than an indescribable force of energy began to emanate from the participant seating.

Ngh... A massive silhouette slowly rose to its feet, a bone-chilling fighting spirit hanging in the air as a burly magical girl stood before the staff.

“Thank you!”

The staff seemed overwhelmed by his presence! But of course! No matter how you looked at it, he definitely wasn’t supposed to be here today!

“...Wh-what is *that*...?” Saji muttered next to me.

“The strongest muscleman girl on the face of the earth, Saji. He’s up there with the White Dragon Emperor, and you wouldn’t even catch a whiff of his presence. He’s also one of my regulars.”

“No way! I’ve never heard the term *muscleman girl* before! What’s that even supposed to be...? Is he even human? I mean it, you seem to attract all sorts of freaks, Hyoudou.”

“...When you put it like that, I can’t really disagree.”

While Saji and I were talking, Mil-tan’s interview had already begun.

“...Let me go first. What are your special skills?”

“Communicating with spirits and using different types of magic.”

“I see. So a lot like some of the previous applicants, then?” the screenwriter asked...

No, no, this was a nonsensical development! You’re telling me because of our girls’ previous weird remarks, Mil-tan’s behavior had left the staff completely unfazed?!

“Okay. Mil-tan will show you the power of her magic!” he said, lofting an extra foldup chair into the air.

The next moment, the muscles all over his body began to flex! His arms, his back—they all began to swell, and Mil-tan easily bent the chair first this way, then that with every undulating movement.

Creeeaak! Creeeaak!

A monstrous sound that definitely had no place in a casting audition echoed throughout the room!

What the heck was he doing?!

All of us watching this were utterly amazed! Mil-tan continued to compress the chair, making it smaller and smaller until it fit comfortably in his two burly hands!

Creeeaak...

The end result was an over-compressed foldup chair no bigger than a rice ball cupped forcefully in the palm of his hand.

It had been reduced to a misshapen iron sphere—which Mil-tan showed off to the staff with a beaming smile.

“Magic to turn a chair into an iron ball. Did you feel my power?”

That wasn’t magic! It was superhuman strength! Some unbelievable act of alchemy!

“Mil-tan’s dream is to be a healer.”

More like a destroyer! How was a move like that supposed to heal anyone?! Everyone observing him was trembling at the sight of his immense strength!

“Nice!” the director said, leaning forward in excitement.

This guy was nuts!

What on earth was *nice* about this?! Just look at those muscles! In what sort of movie were you supposed to find a brawny magical girl...?!

Man, this was one heck of an audition! I had been left holding my head in exhaustion from all the sarcastic comments bouncing through my mind.

At last, Mil-tan’s interview was over, and it was time for the next candidate.

“Next up is Rias Gremory.”

...! It was the prez’s turn! I glanced toward her, just in time to see her face turn scarlet as a tremor took hold of her body.

She had good reason to feel anxious. At this point, her outfit was the least of her worries...

She and I had exchanged a few words on the way here, after the first round of

the audition.

“...I, um, I agreed that if we passed the first round, I would answer the interview questions exactly as Leviathan instructed...,” she confessed.

Apparently, Leviathan had prepared scripts for both the prez and the chairwoman in advance, and both had agreed to go along with the demon king on the assumption they wouldn’t pass the first round...

As it turned out, they found themselves driven into a corner. They both looked visibly tense, the chairwoman just as nervous as the prez!

The prez looked over her shoulder at Leviathan, who stared back, eyes brimming with expectation... What an innocent gaze! She seemed genuinely excited about seeing the prez’s performance!

It wasn’t in Rias to break a promise once made—and so she stood up and approached the panel.

Then, after taking a deep breath, she exclaimed—

“I’m Magical Girl Ria! Evil villains won’t stand a chance against my sparkling magic! Hee-hee!”

Which brings us back to where this all started...

The prez was nothing if not cute!

“I’m Magical Girl Sona! I’ll make those evil demons disappear with my dazzling magic! Tee-hee!”

That reckless appeal had both Leviathan’s and Saji’s faces erupting with nosebleeds as they danced around in ecstasy.

In the end, the prez, the chairwoman, Leviathan, and several others, including Mil-tan, passed the interviews and advanced to the third round.

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In the afternoon, we traveled by bus to the site of the third round of the audition.

“...I wish I was dead.”

“...Yes, me too.”

En route, we each did our best to cheer up the dejected prez and chairwoman. They really had given it their all, the both of them. Something was clearly amiss, though, as they had both made it to the next round.

Before long, the bus arrived at an abandoned factory near the port, which we were told was one of the filming locations.

The idea was to have the remaining applicants do a live performance—certainly an intense way to run an audition.

Just as I was thinking this, a number of suspicious-looking women in black robes emerged from the shadows.

A second later, they fixed us demons with murderous looks, radiating raw hostility... What the...? Clearly these were no ordinary people.

“We’re with Nirlem, the Khaos Brigade’s mage faction. We’re here to protest the demon king Leviathan’s insulting depiction of us.”

The Khaos Brigade?! Here of all places?! And magic users, to boot! Were these the ones angry with Leviathan?! I couldn’t believe they would strike out in the open like this! There were civilians here! I guess, being terrorists, they didn’t really take public safety into account!

“Huh? A prank?”

The producer and the others didn’t grasp the gravity of the situation! It wouldn’t do to involve members of the public here! But amid all the tension, the staff and other human participants began to stagger.

“Huh...? I feel all sleepy...”

One by one, they crumpled to the floor where they had been standing.

“It would be a shame to drag them all into this, so I put them all to sleep,” Leviathan said with a cute wink, one glowing finger raised up into the air.

Whoa! Amazing! So she could put them to sleep just by raising a finger?!

“Issei, everyone! Get these people to safety!”

“Got it!”

Following the prez’s directions, we spirited the staff asleep on the road off to

a safe place!

“Now then, Sona, Rias! It’s magical girls versus magical girls! Let’s make our magic sparkle! Ready? Use the techniques we practiced last night!”

Even in this unexpected situation, Leviathan was issuing the prez and the chairwoman unreasonable demands. The two were naturally taken aback!

“Huh?! Right here?!”

“S-Sister! Consider the time and place! These are terrorists, you know?!”

Even after this somewhat angry outburst, Leviathan’s smile didn’t waver. “Hee-hee! The magical girl outfits you two are wearing are specially designed to only let you use the powers you practiced last night! Now, let’s unleash some magical girl power!”

“Wh-what?! You went *that* far?!”

“Ngh! Sister! Why do you always have to do things like this?!”

Both the prez and the chairwoman voiced their displeasure, but the opposing mages weren’t about to wait for them.

“Don’t dare mock us *real* women mages!”

“Die, demon scum!”

They deployed all sorts of magic squares, launching elemental spells of fire, lightning, water, and more our way!

For our part, we made sure to dodge their attacks while awaiting the prez’s orders!

“Mil-tan will never forgive evil witches!”

Whoa! Mil-tan just threw an empty oil drum at one of them! He was actually fighting the mages with physical attacks!

“Milkyyy Spiraaal Boooooom!”

His next attack smashed straight through the oncoming fireballs and icicle spears the witches threw our way!

“Milkyyy Thundeeerrr Cruuush!”

Next came a kick so sharp, it gouged through the asphalt floor as Mil-tan sent several of them flying all at once!

“Wh-what the...? Who the hell is this?!”

“A new underworld creature?!”

The witches were taken aback! Naturally! That wand of his somehow managed to nullify the witches’ magic. What exactly *was* Mil-tan?!

Hold on, why was he even awake?! Wasn’t Leviathan supposed to have put all the regular humans to sleep?!

Meanwhile, the prez pulled herself together with a shake, tears welling in her eyes as she shouted desperately, “Gremory Waaand!”

Like that, a magic wand appeared from one of her chest ornaments with a cute sparkling effect!

“Sitri Waaand!”

Similarly crying tears of shame, the chairwoman produced her own wand.

Leviathan likewise pulled out her wand, calling out to the prez, the chairwoman, and the female members of both Familias.

“Let’s go, everyone! Levia-beeeeaaam!”

“Ria Shining Love Fiiire!”

“Sona Lightning Aqua Justiice!”

The demon king led the charge with a strong magical attack, followed by the prez and the chairwoman!

With the girls from both Familias adding to the spectacle, a tremendous blast of magical energy exploded across the film set! Not only that, but cute stars and heart marks were scattered all around when the prez and the chairwoman let loose with their attacks!

“Kyaaarrrggghhh!”

The real magic users seemed unable to keep up, the terrorist witches succumbing to the might of these cosplaying demons.

I left the fallen civilians with Kiba and Saji and slipped away into the confusion...

“Take this—Dress Break!”

“Kyaaarrggghhh!”

With a burst of magic, the witches’ clothes were sent flying, leaving me to revel in the sight of their nudity! Bwa-ha-ha!

Thump.

The next moment, Koneko hit me in the back with a light karate chop.

“...K-Koneko? When did you...?”

“...Obscene behavior is forbidden...”

Before I knew it, the battle was over—we had won.

Well, given that we had the demon king Leviathan with us, hailed as the strongest female demon alive, that was kind of a given, right?

“...Ngh. I’ve had enough of this.”

“...Yes. Sorry for dragging you out here, Rias.”

Having put up with the humiliation this far, the prez and the chairwoman let out deep sighs.

The next moment, there was a light popping sound—and the magical girl costumes (Leviathan’s and Rossweisse’s clothes excluded) disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving them completely naked!

“Oh? Maybe the special enchantment I put on them came off during the fight?” Leviathan wondered out loud.

“Eeep!”

Most of the girls squealed at the top of their voices, racing to cover themselves with their hands. A couple, however—namely Xenovia and Akeno—remained perfectly composed even in the nude!

Blood spurted from my nose at this delectable sight! Whoa! They were all naked! And the girls from the Sitri Familia—what a rare spectacle! Awesome! I

would file this away in my brain for Saji's sake!

While I stared intently at them all, more than a few fixed me with incendiary, ghoulish gazes.

Dangerous masses of demonic energy were gathering around their hands... Hold, on, they weren't about to—

"Don't look!"

Their super-powered demonic attacks were headed straight for me!

"Arrrggghhh!" I screamed as I was caught up in the blast!

...That's enough magical girl stuff for a while..., I thought as I collapsed facedown on the ground.

The next day...

Incidentally, the audition was called off. We made sure to erase the production staff's memories about the event, so it was as if the prez and the others had never even taken part.

Leviathan was down in the dumps, but I prayed she would hang in there. But what would have happened if one of our people had landed the role...?

As for Mil-tan...he was gone before anyone knew it. There were so many mysteries surrounding that man!

Leviathan herself had taken an interest in him.

"That girl—she had such strong, pure eyes. I'm sure of it—she's a magical girl, too. Her Milky Powers might be even stronger than my own. I still have a few Evil Pieces left, so maybe I'll recruit her into my Familia?"

There were so many things I could have said in response that I didn't know where to begin!

"...Phew. I'd like to forget all about magical girls for a while, thank you very much." The prez sighed once we were back in the club room.

"I thought you were cute in that outfit, though," I remarked.

At this, the prez's cheeks turned bright red as she fixed me with a smile. *"Thank you. That makes me feel a little better about it all."*

I meant it—she was insanely cute!

Episode Issei.2

...So that's how it went down.

We moved from my room to a table by the Hyoudou residence's underground swimming pool, where we continued our conversation.

I had been busy scrutinizing the latest stack of potential mage partners but decided to stop by the pool for a break. Even in winter, it was fully heated!

I was wearing a pair of swim trunks. Ravel wasn't swimming, but she had put on a T-shirt over her swimsuit... She was still clothed, but there was no hiding just how voluptuous she was!

Akeno's swimsuit was practically skin-tone color, and as always, there was too little fabric to cover everything! Talk about pleasing to the eye!

Chairwoman Sona was wearing a cute one-piece swimsuit in a lovely pattern —no ordinary sight! Who would have thought she would wear swim clothes like that?!

"You may be the first man outside my Familia to see me this way, Issei," she remarked at one point!

Seriously?! Damn, sorry, Saji! Looks like I had taken another of his firsts! He was going to kill me for this...

Bennia, the grim reaper girl, hadn't even bothered to change into a swimsuit.

"I feel most at ease this way."

She was lurking under the table, drinking a cup of tea at everyone's feet... What a strange kid.

Anyway, doing laps in the hundred-meter-long pool was—

"I won't let you beat me, Irina!"

“I’m not losing to you, either, Xenovia!”

Xenovia and Irina, who had entered the pool before us, were engaged in an intense swimming showdown, racing across the water at tremendous speed.

“You can both win!” Asia, wearing a school swimsuit, shouted, cheering them on from the sidelines.

...Then there was a radiant golden creature at the edge of the water—Fafnir! A huge dragon soaking in the warm-water pool!

“Li’l Asia’s school swimsuit. I’ll drink the water she was soaking in later...”

...He was a damn pervert was what he was... On top of his head sat Ophis—and on her head perched Rassei... A three-tiered dragon formation?!

“Combined, we can challenge the Great Red,” she said.

They weren’t combined! They were just stacked on top of each other!

By the way, Ddraig, what’s up with that Panties Dragon?

“I don’t see anything.”

It was no good. He was already broken. He didn’t need to go imitating Fafnir’s way of talking, though... He was probably tired. Right. Take some time off today, Ddraig... Yes, my partner was well on his way to becoming a carefree Heavenly Dragon.

Back on topic, Rias’s magical girl cosplay was super cute—permanently filed away inside my brain... Hee-hee-hee!

...I couldn’t help but wonder if Mil-tan had received a genuine offer to join Leviathan’s Familia. Frankly, I was too afraid to ask... Just thinking I might bump into him the next time we saw the demon king was too much to contemplate!

Anyway... Was there any chance the witches from the Khaos Brigade we had encountered during the audition might have infiltrated the town?

“That Nirlem group or whatever they called themselves—were they the ones who attacked us at school the other day?” I asked.

Akeno nodded. “We’ve met quite a few mage groups now, wouldn’t you say?”

As she said, there were indeed several different mage factions.

The only one deeply involved with us demons, however, was the one led by Mephisto Pheles—the one that had sent the stacks of documents for us to select our potential partners.

On top of that, there was the Golden Dawn, of which Sirzechs's Bishop MacGregor Mathers was a founding member, which specialized in more modern magic.

Then there was the Rosicrucian Order, founded by the famous mage Rüdiger Rosenkreutz, who was later reincarnated into a demon and ascended to one of the underworld's highest ranks (one of my goals!).

Demons and mages were intricately linked, so I had made sure to etch the most famous names and organizations into memory.

I found myself ruminating on the various associations when a new figure approached the underground pool.

“Ah, I’m exhausted, *meow*.”

A sexy woman in a black kimono—Kuroka!

With a languid gait, she approached the side of the pool. Le Fay followed behind her, offering us a polite bob of her head.

“H-hi,” she said.

Chairwoman Sona and Akeno tensed up slightly. They probably still had reservations about Kuroka. The prez must have told Sona about our visitors ahead of time, because she didn’t seem overly surprised to see them.

“We’re back, *meow*,” Kuroka said, wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug!

A soft, supple sensation hit me square on! The fine, white skin of her ample breasts boldly asserted themselves amid her loosely draped kimono!

Then she rubbed her cheek against my own!

“Red Dragon Emperor! I’m so exhausted! I need you to heal me...”

...An amazing smell wafted up from her black hair... I felt like my brain was

melting from the seductive scent of this mature, sexy lady!

E-ever since she had started freeloading at my place, she had been trying to get close to me! Did she think I hadn't noticed?! I mean, I liked it, but still!

Hey, hey! Akeno wasn't looking happy there! Cut it out!

She tended to get really insecure when women from outside our Familia tried to snuggle up to me. Sometimes, you could forget she was meant to be like a dependable older sister! But that certainly did add to her charm!

"K-Kuroka! D-did Vali call you or something?" I asked as she continued to rub herself against me.

She and Le Fay had disappeared when we went off to save Koneko, Gasper, and Ravel from the mages, so something had definitely happened over Vali's way.

"Right," she said, heaving a sigh. "Yeah. That Azhi Dahaka attacked us."

"—?!"

Everyone present—in other words, Akeno, Ravel, Chairwoman Sona, and I—startled.

...But of course! I mean, Azhi Dahaka?! Wasn't that one of the dead evil dragons Azazel had been going on about?!

"...He's a legendary evil dragon, one that perished a long time ago. He was quite vicious, if I remember correctly..." Ravel explained.

The chairwoman picked up where she'd left off: "An evil dragon in possession of a thousand different magic techniques, and who bared his fangs against the forces of the benevolent god Zoroaster. It's said the hero Thraetaona slayed him using something similar to a sealing technique. If, like Grendel, he's returned to the mortal realm..."

...Yep, we would be in for a world of trouble.

But why would the Khaos Brigade and Grayfia's brother want to revive a dead evil dragon...?

Grendel had been ferocious enough, and Azhi Dahaka was meant to be even

stronger. Just how formidable was he?!

“...In a sense, it may be the decisive moment. For the Red Dragon Emperor, I mean,” Ddraig muttered resolutely...

Was he implying I was going to have to fight him...? Damn it, I had hardly had a moment to rest.

Kuroka pulled away from me, her eyes hardening. “...We’ve been traveling around the world seeking out powerful beings and hidden mysteries... Azhi Dahaka was by far the strongest we’ve ever faced.” She paused there, reaching out to take a sip of my tea without asking permission. “...No matter how hard we hit it, with punches, kicks, slashes, you name it, that evil dragon kept coming at us with a huge grin. Blood was gushing from its entire body, but it never looked like he was going to collapse from it... No, not good at all. That’s no normal being. If you ask me, he’s a monster you would be better off not getting involved with. I can see why that what’s-his-name hero had to seal him away...”

...If Vali’s team hadn’t been able to stop him, he was clearly tougher than Grendel...!

“If it can be helped, I’d rather not fight him at all,” Ddraig said in a low voice. *“Albion probably feels the same way. You should always steer clear of beings with destructive impulses like that, partner.”*

Even Ddraig, usually so bold and fearless, was pessimistic about his chances when fighting the evil dragon...

“After that,” Le Fay continued, “another slain dragon—Grendel—appeared, and a man dressed in a robe. Then Azhi Dahaka and Grendel started arguing right while we were busy fighting. Seeing as the situation had already gotten out of control, we took that chance to make a temporary retreat.”

Ah, right. I remembered Grendel and Euclid saying something like that when they left us. So they had a falling-out at the place they’d teleported to?

It seemed evil dragons didn’t even get along with each other... I could see what Ddraig had meant when he said their heads weren’t screwed on right.

“Vali was too eager to fight him. A stupid mistake, *meow*,” Kuroka added in exasperation.

I had to agree with that assessment—the man needed to find another hobby or two outside of fighting.

“Could you answer a few questions I have about that later?” Chairwoman Sona asked Le Fay.

“Sure,” the little witch replied.

“Red Dragon Emperor,” Kuroka said, reaching out to pinch my nose. “Don’t you become like that, you hear? You’re much better off as the Breast Dragon, *meow*.”

“I...I don’t want to be like Vali or an evil dragon.”

That was the honest truth.

“Good boy.” Kuroka nodded—before changing the subject. “So what were you talking about, *meow*?”

“Mage groups,” I said.

Ravel took over to catch Kuroka and Le Fay up.

Once she was done, Le Fay timidly raised her hand to speak. “Actually, I used to be a member of the Golden Dawn. I learned modern magic from them, along with rituals banned by other magical organizations.”

Huh. So that was why she knew unusual magic. Her teleportation technique had come in real handy when Cao Cao trapped us in the underworld during the midlevel demon promotion exam.

Ravel puffed out her cheeks. “You can probably see where this is going from their name, but the stray mages who attacked us the other day—they’re called Hexennacht. I won’t ever let them off the hook!”

Hexennacht was apparently in possession of a Longinus—the Incinerate Anthem. Its user could even be one of their top leaders... A Longinus user at the top of a band of stray mages—talk about a troublesome combination. I would sooner not get involved with them, if I could help it...

Akeno nodded. “Those are the well-known organizations. Though our main trading partner is going to be with Mephisto’s group, I would think.”

Well, both Rias and Azazel had said the only name I needed to remember at this point was Grauzauberer.

Maybe it would be okay if I just focused for now on the stray mage group Hexennacht and the Khaos Brigade's Nirlem...

"There's a lot to remember... The road to becoming a high-class demon sure is tough..." I sighed.

I had a great deal to learn, but I wouldn't be able to progress if I didn't put it all down to memory. As a midlevel demon, I was obliged to keep tabs on these things. It wouldn't do to fall back on ignorance at a critical moment...

"It isn't easy getting to high-class level, *meow*. Your Red Dragon Emperor abilities are already up there, but without the wit to back them up, you just won't be able to cut it," Kuroka said, settling on my lap.

Well, just make yourself at home, sexy lady!

Chairwoman Sona stifled a smile. "That's true. Once you get promoted and recruit your own Familia, things might be a little easier. But as your Familia's King, you'll be taking on a great responsibility."

Yes, I could see that. If I had my own Familia in the future, like how Rias had us, then I would be able to share the workload with my people.

Ah, but that gave rise to a new question, one I had been meaning to ask for a while now.

"By the way, who was the first person you recruited into your Familia, Chairwoman?"

I was interested in the Sitri Familia. Just in case it proved useful later, I wanted to know who her first recruit was.

"Me? That would be Tsubaki. I met her right after I arrived in Japan, and I recruited her into my Familia."

So it was the vice-chairwoman. Well, she did seem to be the closest among her servants.

"Tsubaki...has been through a lot," Akeno said with a fleeting look. "It was a blessing she met Sona, if you ask me."

"Yes, I'm glad I met her, too."

...I had heard a little about Tsubaki Shinra before. Though born into a family of prestigious exorcists, she was essentially shunned and locked away on account of her ability to summon otherworldly beings through mirrors.

She overcame those hardships by becoming a demon, turning her powers into newfound strength. And that was the story of her Sacred Gear, the Mirror Alice.

I turned to Akeno with another question: "You were the first one Rias recruited into her Familia, right?"

"Yes. I was her first servant." Akeno placed her cup down before continuing. "This is a good opportunity, so shall we chat for a bit? I can tell you how Rias and I got acquainted..."

So began the story of their first meeting...

Life.2

Scarlet and Crimson

...What exactly am I?

Ever since I was a small child, I—Akeno Himejima—had asked myself that question.

Having lost my mother at the hands of people who despised fallen angels, and having rejected my father, Baraqiel, I lived an isolated and lonely life.

Then, when I was ten years old, it became possible for me to live by myself, as an itinerant wandering from place to place.

I remember that feeling in my young heart, wanting to set out alone, like it was yesterday. I couldn't rely on my father. If I did, I feared my heart would shatter from the grief of losing my mother and the hatred people harbored toward my father.

In my hands, I clutched the small allowance I had brought with me from home, everything I had saved up. I had been planning on using it to buy a present for my mother's birthday.

I was determined not to use that money unless absolutely necessary, but when my hunger reached its limit, I apologized to my mother in my heart and let it go. Yes, that memory still lingers in my mind.

But money is finite, and without parents, I had to earn more on my own somehow.

Yet what kind of workplace would hire a ten-year-old child?

...I only had two skills of note—the ability to control lightning, inherited from my father, and my mother's knowledge of how to exorcise spirits.

One day, I saved a small child possessed by an evil spirit. Her parents gave me some sweets in return.

This is it, I thought. This is what I can do...

From then on, I went about my days seeking out people possessed by negative energy, purifying them, and receiving small amounts of money or food in return.

It wasn't a luxurious life, by any means. I had no place to live. But I was surviving.

I'll teach you how to drive off scary spirits, Akeno.

...The techniques my mother had taught me kept me alive. It was lonely by myself...but I wasn't ready to die just yet.

Afterward, I traveled throughout Japan and gradually learned how to interact with various different spirits—which conveniently allowed me to maintain a certain distance from other people.

I belonged more with the spirits in any event. I may have had a human body, but I had inherited the blood of a fallen angel. It wouldn't be at all odd for me to be classified as nonhuman myself.

Yes, by the age of ten, I had that perfectly internalized. Keeping my distance from people meant I was less likely to get hurt.

Among those I saved from evil spirits, some offered to take me in. Some were sincere, while others had ulterior motives. I learned to recognize those subtleties.

At times, I was hunted. I often found myself targeted when I carelessly wandered into the jurisdictions of church officials with a particular hatred for fallen angels, or rival exorcists who considered me competition.

A year and a half passed like that...

Over time, I befriended small sprites I met on my journey and learned how to command them.

Then, one day, I reached a town in T Prefecture, where I met a human with the temporary ability to converse with spirits after entering into a pact with a demon. Unwittingly, they had spoken to an evil spirit, which possessed them and nearly killed them. I saved their life.

I should have just let them be, but as luck had it, they begged me to save them. Before I realized what I was doing, I had done just that.

It was only later that I realized the demon the person had made a contract with served the head of the House of Gremory. Without meaning to, I had stepped into demon territory.

I had learned during my travels that demons and fallen angels were mortal enemies. I, of course, possessed the blood of a fallen angel, so I would likely be considered a hostile enemy to be eliminated.

No doubt, I realized, the demon already knew of my involvement with the human.

...On top of that, I knew demons were prideful creatures. For a fallen angel to interfere with a client...they would no doubt kill me for the affront.

I decided to take refuge in an abandoned temple inside the town and wait for the situation to settle down. After all, my best course of action was not to make the situation any worse than it already was.

I was a child—no match for an adult demon.

Then, several days after I had snuck into the temple...

I sensed a presence approaching. I peeked outside the broken door—and saw a wave of crimson.

Yes, beautiful crimson hair. A girl around the same age as me. Like me, she exuded an otherworldly aura. She was glancing about at her surroundings.

Hiding my presence, I slipped away from the temple, concealing myself behind some nearby trees.

I couldn't stay in the temple. Once an enemy knew where I was, that building would become a target. I would have no means of escape if it came under attack.

"If you're there, please come out," the crimson-haired girl called in a loud voice. "If you're honest and tell me why you entered our territory, I won't hurt you."

...Who would believe the words of a demon? At least I knew for a fact that my

exorcism had been discovered.

She may have had a gentle appearance, but she was still a demon. Yet judging from her aura, she was a considerably powerful one... I knew I wouldn't stand a chance if I defied her.

She kept calling out to me, trying to lure me out, but I didn't show myself. I held my breath, waiting for her to leave the temple. I had to be ready to leave as soon as possible. I needed a new hiding place.

When I still didn't show myself, the crimson-haired girl let out a disappointed sigh. Then she called out: "...Just so you know, there are some Shugendoh ascetics looking for you. They wanted to make a deal with us. They asked us to leave you to them..."

...

At this, a shudder took root inside me. It was them; it had to be.

A group of ascetic monks kept popping up seemingly everywhere I went. I thought they considered me a business rival, but it seemed that wasn't the case...

But the crimson-haired girl wasn't finished.

"...Come to me before they find you. I won't do anything bad. Just tell me what happened, and I'll do my best to help you."

Her words were gentle...and somehow reminiscent of my late mother.

Yes, that was how I first met Rias...

—☆★☆—

I had a dream, a memory of a carefree life now passed...

"Mother? Will I be able to make any friends?"

"Of course you will. What kind of games do you want to play with them, Akeno?"

"Um...I'd like to go around different places and maybe join a *club* at school."

"...Do you want to go to school, Akeno?"

"I don't mind. I'm happy with you and Father."

“...I hope you can make some good friends.”

“Yep! And I want my future husband to be strong and kind, just like Father!”

“Oh-ho. I’m sure he’ll be over the moon when he hears that.”

“Why?”

“Well, your father, you see...”

“...Mother.”

When I woke up, I realized I was crying.

I decided to leave my hideaway. After quickly packing my bags, I departed the ruins where I had been sleeping among the small sprites.

The sun was just beginning to rise. Amid the misty dawn, I hurried through the forest next to the highway.

I tried not to be out and about at night, as that was the time when demons were said to be most active. Dawn, I reasoned, would be the safest time to leave town...

I was a child. I realize now how naive I was.

Just before I could leave the forest—

Something hit me from the side, catching my entire body.

All of a sudden, I felt my aura ebbing away... When I looked down, I found myself caught in a net.

...It was no ordinary net. The more I struggled, the more it sapped my strength. There was some kind of power, some kind of technique, at play here.

...A careless mistake. I could sense multiple figures nearby. I had fallen into a trap.

Jingle-jingle...

The distinctive sound of the bells on a monk’s staff echoed through the forest.

“...Found you,” a man’s low voice sounded nearby. “O cursed Himejima girl... scion of a black-winged angel.”

From the shadows, several ascetic monks in conical pilgrim’s hats emerged,

each carrying staves in their hands.

“...We meet again, Akeno,” came a stern voice.

I recognized it at once.

The monks cleared a path to let an elderly man through. Removing his bamboo hat, he stared across at me caught in the net, his eyes filled with sorrow.

“...Granduncle,” I said in a trembling voice.

Yes, this man belonged to the Himejima family—my granduncle on my mother’s side.

The Himejima was a lineage steeped in Japan’s Shinto religion since time immemorial. My mother’s family, for instance, was entrusted with a famous shrine.

My granduncle belonged to the main family. His associates were no doubt all relatives as well.

My granduncle crouched down to address me. “You won’t escape this time. Today, we cleanse ourselves of your disgrace. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Disgrace.

To them, I was an abomination—the daughter of a Himejima woman supposedly defiled by a fallen angel. A source of perennial shame.

The Himejimas were a venerable Shinto lineage. It was simply unthinkable that one of them would bear a child with a being from another mythology.

There was no telling what sort of punishment might befall them if the Japanese gods they served were to find out.

...The Himejimas’ oath of purity was absolute. Because of that, my mother was killed.

With my mother and father no longer in the picture, I wandered the country, finding myself pursued by members of my own family. To them, anyone who tarnished the name *Himejima* practically forfeited their right to continue living.

“...I just want to live,” I said from the bottom of my heart.

...I was an outcast, unable to follow after my mother in death or go along with my father. But if I died, I felt like I would be rejecting my entire childhood, those years spent with my parents in our house. And that was simply unbearable.

My granduncle heaved a mournful sigh as he shook his head. “Do you honestly believe a black-winged creature such as yourself could live a normal life? Over the past year and a half, you must have realized how futile a hope that is... You were always a clever child. A monster cannot obtain human life through strength alone, yes?”

...Yes, I had learned as much firsthand. As I traveled the country, I had seen how those with special abilities needed an abundance of strength and determination to live among normal folks.

I possessed neither. That was why I was so scared, feeling like I didn’t belong in the world...

...But I *was* here!

I had been given the gift of life...! I couldn’t die yet! I didn’t want to!

I summoned masses of lightning in my hands, unleashing them at the Himejima monks!

With a dazzling flash, the lightning raced through their midst. It must have been more powerful than they were expecting, as I caught them off guard, leaving them unable to turn their staves my way.

“No!” Granduncle shouted at the top of his voice—and with that, a burst of spiritual energy shot out, dispersing my lightning.

...I thought I had grown much stronger than I had been during our last encounter, yet my attack, it seemed, still wouldn’t work against him.

The monks corrected their battle stances, their hatred for me intensifying.

“Ngh! Her lightning is growing more formidable by the day!”

“If we don’t take care of her soon, it will come back to bite us!”

They positioned their staves in my direction, when—

“Keee!”

“Keee-eee!”

Several small sprites appeared out of nowhere as if to shield me!

No! They would be slaughtered!

“Stop!”

I flung myself against the net, moving frantically to keep the sprites out of harm’s way.

“...You’re defending them? Perhaps you have inherited that girl’s—Shuri’s—blood,” Granduncle said as he mercilessly directed his staff toward me.

At the end of the weapon, a powerful glow began to build up.

If I fell victim to that attack, it would be the death of me.

“I’m sorry, girl, but there are no black-winged angels to save you now. At least let me dispatch you quickly. There’s no need for you to suffer.”

...I hated men. I hated adults. All they cared about was outward appearances. They never forgave my mother, not even at the very end...! And they saw me as some kind of despicable creature!

Suppressing the disgust and rage welling up inside me, I came out with one last wish: “...Please, let these little ones go.”

“...Ah. Very well.”

“And also... Bury me next to my mother... Please...”

“That I cannot do. You were never meant to be born into this world. I can promise you only the sprites’ safety.”

...I hadn’t really expected him to grant the second request. It was a fleeting wish.

At least the sprites would be safe. Maybe that was enough.

“...Keee!” The sprites wept in concern.

It’s okay, I thought. Thank you for keeping me company.

Really. Live your lives to the fullest, to make up for my share.

Don't hold any grudges for me. Forget you ever met me, okay?

The sprites seemed to understand my wishes, even without my having to put them into words.

Then, as my granduncle's staff increased in power, I closed my eyes, and just before he could unleash it on me—a voice reached out.

“Wait.”

The light at the end of my granduncle's staff dissipated.

The monks and I all glanced around.

Emerging from the trees was a crimson-haired girl—Rias. And beside her stood a dignified middle-aged man in a butler's outfit.

“There's something I want to ask her,” Rias said. “A personal question.”

The monks, knowing her true nature as a demon, turned their staves her way.

My granduncle, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed by her entrance.

“The Gremory girl. I thought you turned us down...?”

Rias flashed him a bold grin. “Yes, we did. This is your problem to sort out. But let me ask *you* something, too. What are you going to do to her? Kill her?”

“...What of it?” Granduncle answered curtly.

“In that case, why not give her to me?” Rias asked.

Those words ignited a stir among the monks.

“Who do you think you are!?”

“Blighted demon!”

“This is a Himejima matter!”

The monks' rain of abuse ended only when my granduncle spoke up: “Silence, all of you... Gremory girl—you dare to meddle in our affairs?”

The two sides glared at each other—when the middle-aged man accompanying Rias intervened.

“Let's calm down, all of us. My name is Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. I'm a

Bishop in Lord Gremory's Familia. You may call me Agrippa."

Yes, this was the demon whose territory I had entered—Agrippa, in the service of the head of the House of Gremory.

The man with an air of refined elegance, this Agrippa, pointed into the depths of the forest. "Would you mind if we had a word over there? It would be best not to burden the children with adult matters."

The fact that he was willing to say this in front of Rias could only mean that he had her unwavering trust.

"...Very well."

Granduncle, the monks, and Agrippa disappeared deeper into the forest. No sooner had they gone than Rias removed the net that had been thrown over me.

"You're okay now," she said with an innocent smile. She stared intently at my black hair. "You have beautiful hair. I really like Japanese people's black hair."

...

Why? For some reason, those words filled me with a sense of relief.

Was it because she called me *Japanese*? Or because she complimented my hair?

Maybe it was more that she was willing to speak to me without reservation, to address me as I was.

After a long moment, the monks and Agrippa returned.

Seeing me set loose, Granduncle turned to face me: "...Promise us two things. Do so, and we swear not to lay hands on you again. First, never again will you set foot in our territory. Second, you will forever remain by the side of that crimson-haired girl. Agree to these terms, and we will leave you be."

...

Those mumbled words were practically unbelievable. I hadn't seen them coming in my wildest dreams.

The monks began to leave in wordless silence while I stood there, mouth

agape. Unable to hold my tongue, I came out with a question: "...Can I keep using the Himejima name?"

"...There are plenty who carry that name in this land," my granduncle said without so much as looking over his shoulder. "Do as you please."

With that, he and the monks left.

Before I knew it, only Rias, Agrippa, and I remained.

"Now, milady," Agrippa addressed Rias cheerfully. "I'll leave the rest to you."

Later, I learned that Agrippa's offer to my granduncle was to transfer my entire existence and history to the House of Gremory.

In short, his proposal was for all parties concerned to pretend that I had been affiliated with the House of Gremory from the very beginning.

From now on, whatever happened with me, it would be considered an issue for the Gremorys. My granduncle insisted on several other conditions, too, and apparently Agrippa had agreed to them all.

As a result, they no longer wanted to kill me.

"Are you sure, Agrippa? What about what she did in our territory?" Rias asked.

Yes—my reckless exorcism of the human who had entered into a pact with the Gremorys.

Agrippa, however, flashed her a soft smile. "I have no interest in punishing small girls. But you were lucky. I'm planning on leaving this territory next month to set myself up in another country. If this child had bumped into a demon from another Familia, well...I doubt there would have been any negotiation."

Yes, I was indeed fortunate. If I had arrived only a month later, my fate would have been sealed.

I used to think demons evil and scary... But these Gremory demons, while strict, understood kindness.

Agrippa patted me on the head. "I'm terribly sorry for taking your life for our own. I know you've had your own circumstances and lived independently up till

now. I'm afraid there was no other way."

I shook my head, and for the first time in longer than I could remember, I broke into a smile.

"No. I'm grateful just to be alive."

I meant those words, from the bottom of my heart.

Even if I was forgotten by the Himejima, the fact that I was still alive was the greatest possible proof that my mother, Shuri Himejima, had once lived.

Years later, I would learn that Azazel reached out from the shadows to help me while the Himejima monks were hot on my tail.

That must have been what my granduncle had been referring to when he brought up *black-winged angels*.

He was probably trying to stand in for my father, watching over the daughter of his close comrade.

Perhaps he even blamed himself for the death of his friend's wife.

But he never brought it up to me directly.

All Azazel ever did was flash me one of his mischievous smiles.

—☆★☆—

When Rias took me to the underworld, I set eyes on a magnificent, luxurious castle.

She introduced me to her mother, Venelana.

"Hello. You must be the fallen angel Lady Rias mentioned. I'm Rias's mother, Venelana. Feel free to consider this your new home."

True to those words, I was given special treatment at the Gremory castle.

They taught me how to conduct myself as a lady, imparted all sorts of specialized knowledge unto me, and gave me opportunities to study.

I found myself thrown headfirst into a world so glamorous that my previous life felt like a lie.

Close to a year passed since beginning my new life in the underworld. I was

reading a book about monsters in Rias's room when I decided to ask her something.

"Hey. Why did you go out of your way to save me?"

"Huh? You're asking that after all this time? Sure, we met by chance, but we're family now. Right?" Yes, it was a huge relief that she felt comfortable being so casual with me.

Rias reached out to grab a nearby chess piece. "You know, I'll be getting my own Evil Pieces soon, so I've been thinking about starting my own Familia."

"...You're asking me to join? Because I'm half fallen angel?"

"You helped that man possessed by an evil spirit back in the human world, didn't you? Why?"

"...He asked me to. That's all."

"Exactly!" Rias answered with an enthusiastic nod. "You're a *gentle* fallen angel! Of course I want you in my Familia!"

...I was taken aback. To be perfectly honest, I thought her one strange demon girl.

I mean, who would want a *gentle fallen angel*?

"Oh-ho-ho."

Rias cocked her head to one side at the sound of this strange laugh.

"D-did I just say something weird?"

"A little, yes."

"R-right... But it's because I thought you were gentle and sweet that I wanted to save you that time."

"...Thank you, Rias. You've made me happy."

Truly, I was filled with overwhelming gratitude for her.

Thanks to her, I was alive and well in the Gremory castle, accumulating knowledge about the underworld, demons, and fallen angels.

Most of the time, I was with Rias, following her back and forth between the

underworld and the human realm. She took me to a great many places. I had never imagined there could be so many worlds out there.

“Look, Akeno! That’s Niagara Falls! But the Great Falls of the underworld we saw the other day were even more impressive, don’t you think?”

She also showed me a great many emotions and expressions. She would get angry, laugh, even cry at times when scolded by her mother. And I was always by her side, encouraging her, laughing with her, sometimes even fighting with her.

Before I knew it, she had become an irreplaceable part of my life.

Sirzechs and Grayfia treated me with kindness, too, as did their Familias. It was around that time that I first met Sona.

Then, when she entered junior high school, Rias received her Evil Pieces from her father.

“Will you be my Queen, Akeno...? Will you become a demon and support me?” she asked, unusually tense.

I agreed without the slightest hesitation. What reason did I have to turn her down at that point?

Later, she would take in Koneko, who had sunken into a depression after the incident with her sister, followed by Yuuto.

When the time came for us to enter Kuou Academy’s high school, she confided something in me.

“Akeno. I’m thinking of joining a school club.”

“What kind? A sports club? Or a cultural club, maybe?” I asked in turn.

Rias eagerly showed me the student guidebook for Kuou Academy’s high school. “What should I do? Athletics would be fine, but so would a cultural one. It’s so hard to decide. And I hear Sona might end up becoming student council chairwoman.”

She seemed genuinely happy about going to high school at Kuou Academy. Then, all of a sudden, she showed an interest in the book I was reading.

“Akeno? What’s that about?”

“It’s a human book that describes monsters and other mysterious phenomena. It’s basically about the occult,” I answered.

Rias flipped through the pages. “The occult, huh...? Then how about the Occult Research Club?”

“The Occult Research Club? B-but I thought it was closed down seeing as it didn’t have enough members...?”

“We’ll revive it!” she declared. “Yep! I’ve decided! I’ll join the Occult Research Club! And you can be vice president! We’ll need other members... Yuuto and Koneko can join, and anyone else who joins my Familia!”

That was the first of her major goals.

“Oh-ho-ho. Sounds good. All right. I’ll be your vice president. We’ll graduate together.”

“I’m planning on going to university, too, you know?”

“Then I’ll serve all the way.”

Rias, however, wasn’t pleased by this response. “No!” she shouted, taking my hand in her own. “You’re my Queen—my friend for life!”

Yes, I understand. I’m your Queen. I’ll always stand by your side.

And I’ll always be your friend. So let me just say this...

...Thank you, Rias.

Episode Issei.3

“Bwaaahhh!”

When Akeno told us about her past, I—Issei Hyoudou—was moved to tears!

I had no idea her first encounter with Rias was such a fateful meeting! No wonder they were always together! I could see why Rias had decided to leave Akeno in charge while she was away! The two of them had been the truest of friends from such a young age.

“...Zzz-zzz...”

Kuroka, having moved from my knee to the seat next to me, had fallen asleep...! Was she calling Akeno’s tale boring...?! That naughty cat...! But it was so moving!

“How has Agrippa been since then?” Ravel asked as she wiped away a tear.

Akeno nodded. “He’s been appointed deputy director of Sirzechs’s magical research institute in the demon king’s territory. Quite an exceptional achievement for a reincarnated demon.”

Huh. So Agrippa, the one who had saved Akeno back then, was now such an important official figure? Could he be among those supporting us in the background?

Either way, it sounded like reincarnated demons could work their way pretty high up the ladder if they set their minds to it...

“...Zzz... Time for a swim...”

Kuroka, still half asleep, rose to her feet, staggered over to the diving board, boldly removed her kimono, and leaped into the heated pool completely naked!

What mesmerizingly bouncy breasts! Hold on, did this mean she *never* wore anything under her kimono?!

"Koneko's sister is gone. Now's my chance. Heh-heh."

First came the sound of heavy panting—then Xenovia appeared in a swimsuit! She and Irina must have finished their race, as they were both coming this way.

"Excuse me, Issei," she said—and seated herself comfortably on my lap?!

Whoa! The soft, delectable sensation of her thighs and buttocks pressed up against my legs!

Perched on top of me, she fiddled with her wet hair before speaking: "Irina and I had a bet. Whichever of us won the race would get to sit on your lap."

That was what it was about?! Did neither of them think to ask what I wanted?!

Tears in her eyes, Irina, also in a competitive swimsuit, removed her swimming cap and let her hair cascade over her shoulders. Yep, her long, unbound hair was super cute!

"I'm so jealous! I want to sit on Issei's lap!" she cried, flashing Xenovia an envious look.

Why was my lap getting so much attention these days?! Seriously, it felt like everyone was trying to sit there lately!

...!

All at once, Irina came up from behind and wrapped her arms around me in a hug, her soft breasts squishing up against my back! Ah, the touch of an angel's squishy breasts...! Thank the heavens! And I had heard angel breasts possessed special properties!

"I've got his back, Xenovia!"

"Ngh! Well played, Irina."

These two were obsessed with winning and losing, but that was a big part of their overall charm.

"Hmph! Issei is fully booked! I want to join in, too!" Asia said, running over tearfully!

Ah, these three were such good friends!

Yes, it reminded me of a certain episode involving the three of them, an incident shortly after the battle with the evil god Loki...

Life.3

To the Holy Ground, Ladies!

My name is Irina Shidou! I'm a high schooler at Kuou Academy!

I used to belong to a certain Protestant denomination, but, well, things happened! And I got reincarnated as an angel!

"Huh? A present for Issei?"

I was eating a sandwich at lunchtime when my two friends butted in all serious like.

"Yes. I heard through the grapevine it's what Issei really wants," said a beautiful girl with sparkling blond hair—Asia Argento—fidgeting in her seat.

She was one of my best friends, and she used to be a saint working for the Vatican. After a complicated series of events, she ended up reincarnated as a demon living in Japan. She's so sincere, so purehearted, and so cute that it's a shame to have to call her a demon!

"Asia said she wants to go shopping, so I'll tag along. She doesn't want to go into town alone," added my other close friend, gorging herself on the contents of a large bento box.

This was Xenovia, a lively girl with green streaks in her hair. She was once a Catholic agent at the Vatican, and we used to work together. Our denominations aside, we fought all sorts of monsters and demons in each other's company.

But now she was a demon, just like Asia.

People probably think angels and demons don't really get along, but ever since our leaders made peace, we've been able to interact normally.

By the way, that *Issei* who Asia mentioned—he's Issei Hyoudou, a childhood friend of mine, and Asia's crush!

I got the feeling Xenovia was really into him, too. As for me...I wasn't sure. He was a bit of a pervert, but he also had this really cool side. It was probably his single-minded passion and hot-bloodedness in everything he did that appealed to me most.

"So we're thinking of going shopping to get him a present the next chance we get. You wanna come, Irina?" Xenovia asked.

Huh?! An invitation to go shopping? How nice of them to include me!

"Yes, I'll go! It sounds like fun!" I agreed without hesitation.

Friends were wonderful!

And so our church-related trio set off to go get Issei a gift!

This time, we're the main stars!

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The next weekend...

We finished breakfast, took a quick break, then left Issei's house (where we were all staying).

We were all in casual clothes—Asia was wearing a cute beige dress, Xenovia a cool jacket and jeans, and me a shirt and a skirtlike pair of lace shorts.

Basically, we were on our way to Tokyo to get Issei that present he wanted.

"What exactly *does* he want?" I asked Xenovia on the way to the train station.

"I think it's called an *eroge* or something. I guessing it's an abbreviation."

"Ah. An *eroge*, huh? I wonder what it is."

I tried to imagine a range of different possibilities, but none seemed to quite fit the bill.

"By the way, the *eroge* he's interested in is something called *Holy Life with My Little Demon Sister 3*," Xenovia said, glancing at her notes.

"...Is it a movie? A DVD?" Asia asked, tilting her head to one side.

Maybe it was?

"Yep," Xenovia said, a twinkle in her eyes. "The clue is in the name. *Little*

Demon must have something to do with demons, and *Holy Life* could be a church ritual. And it's numbered. It has to be a film or TV show or something. I'm guessing he must want the third in a series of video guides about an exorcist purifying girls possessed by demons in church rituals."

"Ah..." Asia and I sighed in admiration at Xenovia's brilliant deduction. W-way to go, Xenovia! Figuring out the answer from such limited information!

Back when we worked together for the church, she had always been the mischievous girl who pushed through problems with brute force. It was amazing to see how much she had developed in such a short span of time...

Maybe it was for the best that she joined Rias's Familia. She sure seemed to be growing more and more with each passing day.

Rias was Asia, Xenovia, and Issei's master—a high-class young demon lady. She was the perfect woman, with the right family background and a wonderful appearance and personality. She was even kind toward angels like me.

I admired her so much!

"But that's Issei for you. He's usually such a perverted goofball, but I have to give credit where it's due. He's training not only his body, but his mind as well... I've got a lot to learn from him," Xenovia said, nodding to herself.

"Yes. He's working so hard day in and day out to become a great demon. Th-that's why I love him! He's amazing..."

Ah, my dear Asia's face had turned bright red. She was in full-on maiden mode again.

Even Xenovia blushed when the conversation turned to Issei. What a sinful boy he was!

"So where can we buy it?" I asked. "Church-related stores? Maybe I can go get it, then...?"

"No, this is a secret gem," Xenovia answered. "They say you can only find it at some place called the *Holy Ground*."

Wow! A holy site! Like Mecca?

"So there's a holy site in Japan? Where is it?"

“Akihabara.”

And so we set off on the first train to Akihabara.

After an hour spent being jostled about on the train, the three of us got off at a place called *Electric Town*.

...

All three of us were taken aback by the scenery outside the station! There were so many electronics stores lining both sides of the street! A-awesome! And they were all so big! Then there were the super-flashy anime signs!

A-and maids handing out leaflets! A-and cars with anime illustrations painted on them! What a weird mix!

“...I—I thought the capital of the underworld was impressive, but this is something else...” Xenovia gawked, her eyes wide open in astonishment.

“I-it is! W-wow! Electronics stores as far as the eye can see!” Asia added, so flustered, she looked like she might pass out.

“I’d heard rumors, but it’s even more incredible than I had imagined. So this is Akihabara...,” I added.

It was amazing. I had moved from Japan to England at a young age, so I didn’t have many memories of seeing Japan’s urban areas up close. The country must have really developed while I was working for the Church in England...

Xenovia was laser-focused on people watching. “So this is the Holy Ground, huh? I guess that makes these people pilgrims? As former representatives of the Church, we had better be respectful. We don’t wanna embarrass anyone.”

“O-of course not!” Asia blurted out, standing up straight.

I nodded, mindful of my posture. Maybe it would have been better if we had come in nun’s clothes?

“Yes. I’ll stand tall as Archangel Michael’s messenger!”

Thanks to Lord Michael, I had been reborn as an angel! I couldn’t afford to disgrace him!

“Anyway, let’s pray before we go to this Holy Ground,” Xenovia suggested.

“““O Lord!“““ we called out in unison!

Yep! We put all our souls into it! Asia and Xenovia may have been demons, but they had received special permission from Heaven to keep praying.

Next, Xenovia pulled a note from her pocket. “I forgot to mention something. When I told them we were going to Akihabara, Issei’s parents, Vice Prez Akeno, and Koneko gave me a list of things to get while we’re here.”

“From Mother and Father? What do they want?”

Speaking of which, Asia regarded Issei’s folks as if they were her real parents and she had vowed to Heaven that she would live her life as their daughter. It was such a beautiful story!

“Um... So his dad wants a TV cable. If we show this to a store clerk, they’ll probably know what it is.”

“Then let’s start at an electronics store!” I suggested, pointing to the one just outside the station.

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“...S-so this is what an electronics store in an economic powerhouse like Japan is like...,” Xenovia muttered in a nervous sweat.

After entering the store, we made a circuit of the different areas before sitting down on a bench on the top floor.

We were left speechless by what we saw, our heads spinning.

I-it was amazing... So many big thin TVs lined up in rows, sound systems blaring out all over the place... Digital cameras, high-tech washing machines, sophisticated lighting fixtures—it was like something from another world.

Yes, I know. We were all raised in the Church from an early age, so our lives had been far removed from this sort of thing. I mean, we did use TVs and computers and so forth, but nothing like the state-of-the-art household appliances on sale here...

It was said tourists came to Akihabara from all over the world, but I had never expected this. It was only the first store, but we were already reeling from culture shock.

“Den-Den-Den, Den-kiii, Denki Jote...”

Asia, in a trance, had even started humming the song playing over the store loudspeakers!

“Asia, snap out of it! This is just the first battle! What are we going to do if you let yourself get knocked out here?! We haven’t even bought anything yet!” Xenovia cried, shaking her by the shoulders.

“...Denpen. You’re so cute... Denpen...”

“Asia! Ugh! Asiaaa!”

They were both losing it! I went to buy some bottles of juice from a nearby vending machine, giving them one each.

For now, a refreshment was in order. Once we were back to normal, we could keep going.

Calming down, Asia took a sip of her juice. “We need to buy that cable Father wanted and move on to the next place. If we don’t...”

She was right. This Holy Ground was no place for us Church girls. If we didn’t leave soon, we might lose ourselves to the mysterious power that resided here.

Once we had pulled ourselves together, we went back downstairs to the TV area to continue shopping. There, we showed a clerk the name of the cable Issei’s father wanted and successfully purchased it.

After that, we went back downstairs, nervously looking about at all the mysterious machines.

While investigating one corner of the store, Xenovia called out to us, “Asia! Irina! Look!”

She was shaking violently, her eyes fixed on some small mechanical box.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Xenovia?” we asked, puzzled.

She caught her breath. “L-look at this... It says you can make bread in it...!”

...!

Those words left Asia and me speechless... C-could it be true? It was so hard to believe...

But after looking at the product description, it did indeed look like it was capable of making bread...

"O-oh my... You *can* make bread with this. You don't even need an oven... I can see the bakers losing their jobs..." Asia said in a shaky voice, raising her hand to cover her mouth.

I glanced across to check the name... It was called a *home bakery*!

A home bakery! Could it be any more direct?!

"A home bakery! This is proof of Japan's obsession with food...!"

"I-it says you just need to put the ingredients in, and it does the rest!"

"How many lost souls could this device save...? S-so this is cutting-edge Japanese technology...! This is far more advanced than our alchemists!"

The three of us each put our hands together.

"""*O Lord! This device could save so many believers!"*"""

We were so moved, we just had to praise the Lord! No wonder this was called the Holy Ground! It really was a sacred place!

"I—I want one. But the cost... Ugh," Xenovia groaned when she saw the price tag.



It was almost thirty thousand yen. So expensive! We were high schoolers, so there was no way we could afford that!

I may have been an angel, but my salary wasn't much different from that of a regular part-time job like most high schoolers had. Asia and Xenovia didn't seem to make a lot from their demon business, either.

The three of us checked our wallets with pained expressions.

"...I—I bought some clothes and a few comics the other day, so I don't have a lot left..."

"I just got a full set of training equipment... Ngh..."

Neither Asia nor Xenovia, it seemed, had much to contribute.

The same went for me. The last time I went to buy some stuff from Heaven and some decorations for my room, my money seemed to fly away...

Ah! R-right! Maybe there *was* a way!

At that moment, an idea sparked in my head!

"Maybe I can treat this as a business deduction! I'm sure Lord Michael will forgive me so long as it helps save at least one lost soul!"

I whipped out my cellphone and dialed Heaven. After a few questions back and forth with the representative on the end of the line, I made a peace sign to my friends.

"They said we can use my angel credit card!"

They both broke down in tears!

"Do you really mean it?!"

"Lord Michael is merciful!"

Angels were supposed to use their credit cards only when absolutely necessary, but this time, I had received a special exemption!

Ah, Lord Michael! What a compassionate soul!

Shedding tears, I offered a prayer of gratitude to Heaven and the archangel.

Please watch over me, Lord Michael! I'll bake lots of bread and show those

lost lambs the path to salvation!

Shortly afterward, I received a rather stern call from Heaven. "You are responsible for covering the cost of the bread ingredients," they said.

Oh, the path of the faithful was a trying one! But I would do my best!

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"Next up, the vice prez's shopping," Xenovia said, glancing down at her notes while effortlessly shouldering the home bakery in its sealed box.

What a relief to have someone with her strength during a sudden shopping spree!

"Yep. Maybe a cosplay shop?" she said.

"Cosplay? Is that what Akeno's into lately?" I wondered out loud.

Akeno Himejima—a senior demon in the same Familia as Asia and Xenovia, and a beautiful Japanese woman with glossy black hair and an impressive figure. It was said she used her enchanting body to seduce Issei night after night.

Asia! Xenovia! If you let your guard down, Akeno is going to snap Issei up before you know it!

"...A-another provocative costume? The other day, she snuggled up to Issei in one that showed so much skin..." Asia said, worried.

She must have feared she would lose Issei to her with this new outfit... Hmm! Issei was *definitely* one sinful boy!

After asking a few passersby for directions, we entered a store that supposedly sold cosplay outfits.

The second we entered, we were positively overwhelmed by the sheer variety of rare costumes! There were some that looked like nun's clothes, others that could have been school uniforms, and more!

Wow! So many cute ones, too!

Girls that we were, Asia and Xenovia took great interest in the different options.

After checking with the salesclerk, Xenovia finally found what Akeno was after.

The moment Asia and I laid eyes on it, our cheeks burned red!

"...It's called *bikini armor*, apparently. It's something female warriors wear in these video games," Xenovia said, inspecting the bikini-style suit of light armor in her hands.

It barely covered anything! A-and the lower part was at such a provocative angle! G-given Akeno's bust size, something told me the top part wouldn't fully cover her, either!

Ah! So that was the plan! To captivate Issei with her overflowing cleavage! Knowing his love for breasts, if she approached him in such a sexy outfit, he would gladly leap at any opportunity presented!

"...As a swordswoman, I feel like I should try it myself at least once," Xenovia said, her eyes lighting up at the challenge!

No doubt she was burning with rivalry toward Akeno, even if she wasn't here with us!

"Sure! You can try it on over there if you like," a female clerk said, guiding us to the fitting room!

"Hmm. I'll give it a shot," Xenovia said, waltzing inside.

"M-me too!" Asia picked an equally revealing outfit from the shelves and raced after her.

Oh dear. So Asia had a rivalry with Akeno, too? Well, maybe I should consider wearing one as well. Hmm, maybe this one? I had always wanted to try something like this.

I rushed into the fitting room next to the others and changed my clothes.

"*It's a strange material, but it isn't uncomfortable. If it's this sturdy, it might actually be useful in real-life combat,*" sounded Xenovia's voice. She seemed to really like the outfit.

"...Y-you have to be curvy enough to wear clothes like that, like you are, Xenovia... I don't think I have enough volume...," came Asia's voice. For

whatever reason, she didn't seem fully satisfied with it. I thought she had a slender, beautiful figure, though!

"Heh-heh-heh. That's not true. Look."

"Huh...?! X-Xenovia! You can't grab people like that...!"

"I think you're plenty big enough, Asia! You weren't comparing yourself to the president or the vice president, were you?"

"...B-but Issei likes big breasts... I don't think he would be really satisfied with mine..."

"Nonsense. Kiryuu told me what it really comes down to is sensitivity. So long as they're nice to the touch, men will be happy with them. I'm sure even Issei would be over the moon with yours."

"R-really...?"

"Of course. I'll bet he'll grab them like this."

"A-argh! Nggghhh..."

"That's a sexy moan you've got there, Asia."

"Y-your fingers, Xenovia...! Th-they're moving so fast! Ugh! I won't lose! Hah!"

"Oooh! Asia... Where did you learn that...? Oooh... M-my chest feels so weird..."

"I just did what you used to! You don't remember how you used to caress my body with that dirty touch you have?"

"...R-right... I guess the difference between doing it and someone else doing it to you is like the gulf between Heaven and Earth... O-oooh...! Asia! My body's feeling weirder and weirder..."

...Just what were they doing in that fitting room? If Issei could overhear this, he would have a nosebleed for sure.

Finally, we all stepped out.

"Wow!"

The other female customers browsing the costumes looked up at us, letting

out admiring gasps.

They looked better in the outfits than I did. Xenovia had pulled off that bikini armor look flawlessly and, as a bonus, stood there deftly swinging a replica Western sword about. Asia looked shy and embarrassed in her revealing dancer-like outfit, but she had a mysterious beauty about her. Most importantly, the contours of her body were absolutely perfect, and the dancer's costume fitted her like a glove.

I was wearing a little demon costume, black with small demon wings on the back along with a tail near my butt. It wasn't as flashy as the other two, but at least I was showing my belly button.

After cosplaying for a short while, we bought the costume Akeno wanted and moved on to our next shopping destination.

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"I got the book Mother wanted!" Asia said, boasting about her harvest on a park bench.

After buying a book Issei's mother had asked for from a large bookstore in Akihabara, all that remained was to buy Koneko's request and a special gift for her true love, Issei.

We stumbled across a park, and so we decided to take a short rest break.

"It's exhausting, being surrounded by all these unfamiliar sights."

Xenovia was more tired than I had expected, leaning on the park bench and cricking her neck. All the same, she was heartily gulping down a hamburger she had purchased at a nearby store.

"Y-yes... You can walk and walk here, but if you don't know the place, you lose your bearings once you stray from the main road..." Asia added, sipping a bottle of tea through a straw.

They were right—unfamiliar places did take a toll on you. Xenovia and I were used to operating in unknown lands, but those were combat missions for the Church, completely different from our current situation.

This Holy Ground had turned out to be much more complex than might have been expected, and it was full of strange shops. At least Xenovia seemed to

know where to get Koneko's request and Issei's present, so hopefully we could finish up without any more problems... But I *did* feel unsettled.

All right! I thought, slapping my cheeks. You can't afford to whine here, Irina! You're in the direct service of Archangel Michael! How will you be able to show yourself in Heaven if you can't deal with something like this?!

"Come on, Xenovia, Asia! Let's keep going!" I called out.

They were taken aback for a second but quickly nodded in agreement.

"Yep!"

"Right!"

The three of us were ready to get back into the swing of things!

"Hey, you guys. Are you busy right now?" three young men called out toward us. They had dyed hair, piercings, and flashy clothes.

"...Huh? Maybe they're from overseas? They might not speak Japanese," one of them said, tilting his head.

"No, we can speak it," Xenovia answered.

The men seemed pleased to hear this. Demons could handle practically any language. We angels, by the way, have the same ability! The men must have been surprised to see just how fluent we were.

"Easy, then. What do you think—wanna have some fun with us?"

Ah, so they were trying to chat us up? Wow, no one had ever hit on me before! I was touched! I wished I could've been hit on by someone a little cooler, though...

Asia wore an awkward look, hiding behind Xenovia shyly.

"That blond girl is, like, super cute!"

"Whoa! She looks so innocent!"

Her behavior was a huge hit with the men. I mean, it *was* cute. Still, I couldn't see her feeling comfortable dating anyone but Issei.

Xenovia twisted around to check on Asia, then murmured, "I'll only submit to

a man stronger than me. If you can beat me, I'll play with you."

What a provocative statement!

The men snickered. To a casual observer, Xenovia might come across as fragile and delicate at first glance. Her slender figure, however, was the result of intense training. On top of that, she was a demon, which already put her out of the league of any ordinary man.



“Come on, don’t be like—”

The second of the men reached out, Xenovia nimbly dodged, tripped him over with her leg, and moved to deliver a sharp kick to his face as he fell to the ground, stopping just short.

“Think you can beat me?” she demanded in a cold voice.

“““Sorryyy!””” the men whimpered, scurrying to their feet and fleeing the scene.

“It’s all right now, Asia,” Xenovia said with a reassuring smile.

“Yes! But I feel kind of bad for those three...”

Yes, she was a gentle soul, worrying about the likes of them.

Xenovia patted her softly on the head. “It’s all right. I’ll look out for you today in Issei’s place. Even if that means being a bit reckless.”

“Xenovia!” Asia exclaimed, reaching out for a hug!

Ah, what a beautiful friendship!

After all that, we headed to an anime store.

Koneko’s request was for merchandise from a series called *Neo Neko Neko Paradise*. From what I could tell, she had a lot of interests—from various anime and drama series to songs and comedy shows.

Among them, she was particularly fond of this anime program about a cute cat creature solving all sorts of crime mysteries.

Koneko was our junior, a demon girl like Xenovia and Asia! She was so petite and adorable!

“Ah, *The Green Dragon of Eden!* My favorite girls’ manga! It’s all about a gluttonous dragon in a floating city resolving strange incidents.” Asia was positively thrilled to find her favorite work in the manga corner.

“Hmm. I can’t find mine anywhere,” Xenovia muttered. She, too, was looking for something in particular.

“What don’t they have?” I asked.

"Strike of the Student Council. It's about five powerful warriors elected by the schools' students who duke it out in the student council room to work out who's number one. In the last issue, the vice-chairwoman fell victim to an underhanded trick from the secretary, so there should be a new one popping up soon. It's getting really good. I'm thinking the chairwoman will use her huge build to power up."

Xenovia was fond of battle-themed boys' manga.

They both loved comics and used them to help learn Japanese characters.

Huh? I stumbled on a book that looked like the one Koneko wanted, along with a bunch of related goods. It seemed to have its own section.

"Hey, Xenovia, Asia. Is this it?" I called out. The two of them came over.

"No doubt about it." Xenovia nodded. "She gave me a picture just to be sure. That's it."

She reached out to pick up a cat doll. Oh? So this was what Koneko wanted? It looked like a large-eyed cat dressed in a butler's outfit.

"All right! We need to leave Akihabara by three o'clock, so let's get this and take a look around."

Xenovia sure was taking the lead today. She was probably thinking she had to look out for Asia seeing as Rias and Issei weren't here. Such a strong sense of duty and responsibility!

"Ever since we got to this Holy Ground, I've gotten all excited over that home bakery, bought a bunch of books, and now manga, too... Lord, when did I become such a greedy, reckless spender...?"

Ah, so she was fretting again. Some things never changed, huh?

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We had already accumulated an assortment of shopping bags when the time came to make our final purchase.

Hot on the trail of a present for Issei, we stepped off the main street and into a side alley.

We turned left and right so many times, I completely lost my bearings...

Xenovia was supposedly leading us with the help of a map, but Asia and I still exchanged anxious looks.

All of a sudden, Xenovia's feet ground to a halt. She was staring at one of the buildings to our right. Was that it?

"X-Xenovia? Is there really a store hidden all the way back here?" Asia asked uneasily.

"Yeah. Apparently you can't buy that *eroge* Issei wanted at just any old shop."

"Huh? They don't sell them out in the open?" I asked dubiously.

Xenovia seemed equally unsure. "That's what Kiryuu told me."

Kiryuu was a glasses-wearing girl in our class. She had a wealth of perverted knowledge and was very open about it all. Sh-she sometimes got me in trouble, too.

Anyway, Asia and Xenovia took her opinions seriously. I gathered they wanted to increase their level of dirty knowledge for Issei's sake, but was that really the right move...? I wasn't sure.

"She said the shop in this building here will sell us one if we tell them she sent us. It looks a bit cramped, so maybe I'll go by myself."

With that, Xenovia stepped forward—only for Asia to stop her.

"No! I'll go!"

Oooh! She was all fired up there!

"I-it's a present for Issei... S-so I—I..." She trailed off, mumbling, red-faced.

Yep, yep! Her feelings for Issei were in full bloom!

Xenovia broke into a grin at this sincere display of affection. "Got it. But don't do anything crazy, okay?" she said, handing her the notepad and ruffling her hair.

"Yes! I'm off!" she exclaimed, pumping herself up as she started climbing the stairs.

...

Xenovia and I waited at the bottom for a few minutes when—

Tap-tap-tap!

All at once, a crowd of red-faced men poured out of the multiuse building. Wh-what was going on...?

A short moment later, wobbling and flushed, Asia stumbled down the stairs. *Something* must have happened up there! She didn't look right at all!

When finally she reached us, she fell to the ground. Wh-what on earth happened?!

"Asia! Stay with me! Asia!" Xenovia cried, holding her in her arms.

Asia trembled all over. "...S-so many men... S-so many breasts... Uggghhh..."

With those words, her eyes rolled back, and she passed out!

"Men?! Asia! Hey, Asia! Damn it! What the hell happened?!" Xenovia glared up at the run-down building, a combative aura beginning to emanate from her body.

Yep, she was positively enraged over whatever had befallen Asia!

"...I underestimated this Holy Ground. There are people from all sorts of religions here. To them, *we're* the infidels... They're probably used to persecuting people like us... Damn them all, going after Asia because of her faith...! And men, ganging up on her?! Did they steal her honor before her wedding day?! I'll never forgive them, those heathens...!"

I couldn't say for sure, but I felt like she was least half right! This *was* a sacred place. And I knew for a fact that holy sites had fallen under infidel attack throughout history. It was probably no different here.

...Basically, Asia had fallen victim to pagan oppression!

Having landed on the answer, Xenovia and I exchanged glances and nodded to each other.

"Let's go, Irina! We've gotta avenge her!"

"Right!"

And so we dived deep inside the run-down building...

We stormed in, ready to face any enemies unlucky enough to cross our path...

...Yet what we found was the height of perversion!

We were utterly floored when we entered one room, a store filled with erotic illustrations of young women. Never would we have known it catered to customers looking for *that* sort of thing...

Oh, how embarrassing! Asia must have taken a critical hit when she saw those naughty images!

"After seeing such a pure and innocent young blond girl walk in here, our customers ran outside in embarrassment," the manager told us.

I wondered if, captivated by Asia's innocent appearance, they found themselves unable to resist impure thoughts...

Anyway, Xenovia and I had assumed she had fallen under a religious attack! Ugh, how could I be so naive?! Talk about embarrassing!

Xenovia gave the manager the note, and we picked up the item we had come here for.

Holy Life with My Little Demon Sister 3, it said. So this was an *eroge*—an erotic video game! It wasn't about living a holy life at all! I should have expected as much from Issei!

"All done... Let's catch the train home..." Xenovia suggested in exhaustion.

"R-right..." Asia and I groaned in tired agreement.

"Well, that was fun," Xenovia murmured to me on the train.

Asia had nodded off, sound asleep with her head resting on Xenovia's shoulder.

"Oh-ho, good work today, Asia," I whispered as I poked her cheek.

"Yes, it was," I added in response to Xenovia. "That Japanese Holy Ground was rife with mystery, but it *was* fun."

"Yeah, there was that. But I had a blast just shopping with you two. I've never lived like this before," she answered with a distant look.

Indeed. We had both dedicated ourselves body and soul to the Lord since we

were little, after being scouted on account of our unique talents. Because of that, we never got to live like ordinary girls.

But in the end, thanks to everything we had been through, we could now.

It was such a wonderful feeling. No doubt Asia was enjoying herself as well. I mean, not only was this new life fun, but she even got to live with the man she loved most!

“Let’s go shopping again sometime,” Xenovia said, her gaze softening. “Just us girls.”

...

...She really had changed. Just look at that dazzling smile! Asia, Issei, Rias, and the others were clearly a good influence on her.

How long would I be able to live with them all...? If I could, I’d like to keep on going this way. Yep, what more could I ask for?

“Yes, of course. Let’s go back to that Akihabara Holy Ground one day.”

We could even bring Koneko, Rias, and Akeno with us!

“About that *eroge*, though...,” Xenovia murmured, pulling the video game box from its paper bag and giving it a hard look.

...On the back, it was covered in lewd images! So many pictures of men and women doing all sorts of naughty things!

“I checked with the store manager. Basically, it’s a perverted video game. Issei... He’s surrounded by so many women, and he’s still hankering for more? No, that isn’t the main problem here...”

She was riled up all right, visibly trembling with anger.

“...The girls in this game all look like they’re older and more mature. The whole thing seems to be about simulating sex with them. I’d say his desires are directed to the prez and the vice prez... Why not a game called *Baby-Making with a Former Church-Goer* or something?! Aren’t Asia and I good enough for him?!” she cried, jumping to her feet as a powerful aura flared up around her!

“Calm down, Xenovia! People are staring!”

Ngh! Why was she holding the *eroge* box up for everyone to see?!

“When we get back, I’m calling an emergency meeting with the girls!”



I-it sounded like this was only the beginning... Good luck, Issei...

"...Issei... I bought it... That *eroge*... Mm-hmm...," Asia mumbled in her sleep.

I let out a small laugh. Yep, what a peaceful sight!

We had a great time today, Lord Michael!

Episode Issei.4

Our Church Trio, it seemed, went on an interesting adventure.

...Afterward, the girls ganged up to grill me on erotic video games, and to top it off, they even made me play them together with everyone! Talk about humiliating!

Ugh... One of my favorite fetishes had been laid bare...

"Rias told me Xenovia and Irina were getting bolder recently, but Asia as well...? It must be hard for you, Issei," the chairwoman said matter-of-factly.

Seriously?! Was this some kind of competition, with me as the grand prize?!

Xenovia and Irina could both be pretty pushy, you know?! I ended up getting hurt more often than I wanted to admit! They were both warriors, so there was no way I could keep up when they decided to get serious!

"...It's hard, being a latecomer," Ravel murmured.

Ah, she wore a distant look! My manager didn't seem to know what to do with herself now that my lap had been taken! I would have to give her a nice pat on the head later!

"Be sure you don't do anything like that at school," the chairwoman said, her glasses giving off a sharp glint. "That sort of behavior won't be tolerated on campus."

U-understood! I was already being targeted by the other guys because of how well I got along with all the school idols! I couldn't understand why some of Kiba's fans were angry at me, though!

"By the way, what were you all talking about just now?" Xenovia asked as she snatched a cookie from the table.

When I told her we were discussing magic and mages, her expression turned

grim.

“...I’ve been bad with magic users ever since my time at the Vatican,” she muttered.

I could see why. Given her combat style, magic users were her natural enemies. That being said, she did effectively break through magic attacks using the Excalibur in our last battle.

“There are lots of different opinions on magic in the Church, aren’t there?” Asia said, continuing the conversation.

“*That’s right.*” Xenovia and Irina nodded in unison.

As Asia said, the Church was apparently divided on the use of magic. Seeing as it ultimately stemmed from observations of demonic powers, it wasn’t surprising that the faith’s leaders didn’t find it particularly appealing.

From what I heard, magic from other mythological systems (such as Norse magic) was even more divisive, seeing as it deviated from the realm of the Biblical God. Religion sure was complicated, huh?

That being said, there were supposedly those Church warriors who made use of magic surreptitiously...

“I have a question,” I said to Xenovia and Irina. “What do you think it would take to break through someone’s magic?”

The terrorists we were pitted against recently had been mages, so I was curious.

“Power!” Xenovia began.

“Especially if you’re fighting close up. Of course, you need it from a distance, too,” Irina added.

Hmm. Well, that *was* how the two of them had wreaked havoc during the last incident.

I heard someone breathe a deep sigh.

“Is that your approach to magic? Very well. Maybe it’s my turn to share a little story.”

This from Rossweisse, showing up in a tracksuit. She must have just come home from a shopping spree at the local hundred-yen store.

...For a woman of her looks to be dressed in a jersey and sweatpants. Such a waste.

“Are you listening? It’s time you learned about anti-magic...”

Like that, she addressed Xenovia and Irina like a teacher lecturing her students. Well, she *was* a teacher, albeit in social studies. Azazel, by the way, taught chemistry. *Fits his character, don’t you think?*

But I remembered another person saying something similar to what Xenovia had said just now.

“Magic can be managed both offensively and defensively... That’s what Almaros, one of the leaders of the Grigori, told me...”

Yeah, I paid a visit to the Grigori training facility to meet some real serious-minded individuals after our match against the Bael Familia...

Life.4

Training Time! (Hell Edition)

One day after school when there weren't many people in the club room, Akeno approached to ask a favor: "Issei? Would you be able to come out with me after this?"

"Huh? Sure, I don't have any other plans today... Where did you have in mind?"

She would normally flash me a mischievous smile or say *Oh dear* or *Oh-ho-ho* or something like that, but she seemed unusually shy and fidgety.

"...A Grigori training institute. I have some business to attend to..." she answered, keeping her words to a minimum.

Glancing down, I noticed she was holding a paper bag in her hands.

...A Grigori training institute? The Grigori were an organization of fallen angels, and our club advisor, Azazel, was their leader. They conducted all sorts of research, including observations on Sacred Gears and their users.

So they had a training facility...? I knew that they were headquartered in the underworld and that they had branches all over the world (and in the underworld), but what business could Akeno have there? Did it have something to do with Azazel? Or else... Two other possibilities came to mind. At any rate, the paper bag must have been related in some way or another.

"If you can't, I understand. Sorry for coming to you out of the blue with such a strange request... You and Rias are the only people I can turn to for this sort of thing..."

Well, there was no way I could turn her down now, was there?! Not that I would refuse a request coming from her in the first place!

"Not a problem!" I said, confidently thumping my chest. "I'll go wherever you

need me, Akeno!"

"Thank you," she answered with a cute smile.

Whoa! Her big-sister-mode smile was one thing, but this young maiden version was something else entirely!

"U-um... Can I come, too?" Gasper asked, timidly raising a hand.

"It's unlike you to want to go on a trip like this," I pointed out.

It really was remarkable that this closeted shut-in would volunteer to tag along.

"Y-yes. I—I'm interested in the Grigori's training facility myself..."

Ah. So that was it. Well, it didn't bother me.

"Should we get going, then? All three of us?"

With that, it was decided.

The three of us made the jump via teleportation square and arrived at the Grigori's newly established training facility in the Kanto region. The institute was nestled deep in the mountains, hidden away from human civilization.

According to Akeno, Azazel had been dying to set up a new research institute not too far from Tokyo, and so he had negotiated with the various camps concerned and established it as a joint venture with them.

This was my first time learning all this! Seriously, Teach! What gives?

The teleportation square delivered us right into the heart of the research institute. It must have been finished only recently, as it still smelled of construction everywhere we went.

We set off down the corridor. The walls and ceilings were immaculate—not a scratch to be found, nor so much as a speck of dirt.

Every now and then, we passed people in white lab coats who I could only assume worked at the institute. I had no idea who they were, but they seemed to know us, as they all greeted us with a friendly *Hello*.

"...It's like we're famous," I remarked.

"Yes. We're close associates of the governor, after all," Akeno answered.

Right. We had a direct line to the head of the fallen angel organization, didn't we? From the outside, it must have looked like we were the last boss's personal subordinates. There was no way these people wouldn't know about us... Hey, Gasper! Quit hiding behind me! Show a little confidence! Stick your chest out!

Hmm... A suspicious organization building a hidden research facility in a remote location...? Wasn't this the kind of place the heroes of most stories set out to destroy?

"Huh? What's the big idea? Why are you guys here? Who gave you the heads-up?"

Before I knew it, a voice called out to us—a familiar one, at that... I looked over my shoulder, and there he was—Azazel!

"Huh?! Teach!"

"*Huh* yourself...," he muttered, pursing his lips.

"What are *you* doing here?" I asked back.

Azazel scratched his cheek. "Come on. This is a new Grigori research institute. It just got built, so there's still a lot of things we need to get up and running. I drop by every once in a while to check on things."

That made sense. I mean, he *was* the leader of the fallen angels. It was only natural for him to make sure the institute was run properly.

"...Anyway, what are *you* lot here for?" he asked, his gaze shifting between me and Akeno.

"Right. Akeno said she had business she needed to do here."

"Is Baraqiel... Is my father here?" she asked.

Ah, I knew it had something to do with her dad.

The next moment, Azazel flashed her a suggestive grin. "Ah, Baraqiel. I get it."

"Is there a problem?" Akeno demanded, annoyed. "Don't look at me like that."

She was positively fuming. Her embarrassed reaction was kind of cute,

though.

Azazel must have thought so, too, as he wore a devilish grin. Not long ago, the mere mention of her father's name would have sent her into a rage, so things certainly did seem to have changed for the better. Then again, Akeno had always been hard on Azazel.

"So Issei's your chaperone...? And Gasper?" he asked, his gaze turning to the figure hiding behind my back.

Gasper timidly raised a hand. "U-um, er...I wanted to take a look..."

Take a look? At what, exactly? I had no idea.

"...Here are the documents you wanted, Azazel," called a figure behind us.

Turning around, I laid eyes on a young man dressed in a white coat. He was shorter than me, his face hidden behind shaggy hair and a pair of Coke-bottle glasses—the spitting image of a scholar who spent all his time immersed in research.

The moment Azazel saw him, he raised a hand in greeting.

"Ah. Thanks, Sariel."

"Um... Who's this...?" I asked.

"Ah, yeah. I almost forgot to introduce you. This guy in the funny glasses here is Sariel, one of our executives. He likes to study the moon and related magical effects."

...! I was taken aback by that name! Naturally! So this bespectacled lab-coat-wearing guy was a high-ranking fallen angel?! Seriously?! I had met my fair share of fallen angel leaders before, each of them with their own unique personalities, but they had all been physically imposing and powerful. In contrast, Sariel looked like your typical scholar.

I must have been wearing my surprise for all to see, as Azazel peered back, puzzled. "What are you gawking for, Issei...? Ah, I see. Most of the other fallen angels you've met were the kind to go fight out on the front lines. Guess that includes me... We've got scrawny members, too, like this one here. And hey, just so you know, when we founded the Grigori, we were all just a bunch of

eager researchers. Bet you wouldn't have guessed it."

Oh? Sariel didn't come across as overwhelmingly powerful, but with his being a top-ranking fallen angel, I didn't want to underestimate him... They did say you can't judge a book by its cover, after all.

"This is the Red Dragon Emperor, Sariel... But you probably guessed that," Azazel said by way of introduction.

Sariel and his bottle-shaped glasses nodded. "Of course. Nice to meet you, Red Dragon Emperor Issei Hyoudou. I've heard of your battle exploits."

I bowed my head, reaching to shake his outstretched hand.

"U-um, nice to meet you, too!"

So he already knew about me. Not surprising, if he was one of Azazel's old associates.

"...And this is Baraqiel's daughter," Azazel continued.

Akeno offered a polite bow. "Thank you for looking out for him... M-my father, I mean. I'm Akeno Himejima."

Sariel startled, tilting the angle of his glasses. "Ah, Bara's girl. Yes, I've heard the rumors. You're as beautiful as they say. No wonder everyone's head over heels for you."

My thoughts exactly.

Azazel took the documents from Sariel, flipped through them quickly, then signed his name on the first page and handed them back. "There you go. Now that's done, you can do whatever you like."

At this, Sariel broke into a creepy grin. "Hee-hee-hee. Thanks a bunch. Time to cut, paste, and crush it! Hee-hee-hee!"

Whoa, that bespectacled fallen angel was creeping me out with that weird laugh of his! And a dark aura was seeping out all around him! Talk about scary! Just like I thought, these fallen angel bigwigs were one weird bunch!

"Huh? That girl... She's a vampire?"

The girl Sariel was staring at—was Gasper. Well, he did look awfully feminine,

didn't he? But he was a guy!

Suddenly finding himself in the spotlight, Gasper squirmed and hid behind me. Oh well. Time for me to step up.

"Yes, this is Gasper Vladi. He's a demon, but he also has vampire powers, and —"

Before I could finish my introduction, Sariel grabbed his hand and ran off with him!

"Perfect timing! I was just looking for a vampire! I need your help!"

"Eeep! What are you doooiiing?!" Gasper wailed as he disappeared down the hallway.

Heeey! That guy just nabbed Gaspy!

"Don't worry, Issei." Azazel sighed. "His research won't kill the kid. Probably."

"Probably?! What exactly is he going to do to him?! And all that about cutting and pasting and crushing?! You can't tell me that doesn't sound dangerous!"

Seriously, what sort of research was that...? No, better not to ask. It would probably fly right over my head... Anyway, Gaspy, we'll pick you up on the way back!

"Right, Baraqiel, let's go find him, then," Azazel said as we set off into the building complex.

-○●○-

Before long, we reached a conference room reserved for Grigori executive use.

Two figures were already seated at a round table... I had never seen them before. One was a tall, blond-haired man, well dressed in an elaborate robe and with a circlet adorning his head.

The second was a woman! She had sharp, slanting eyes and long, light purple hair! One look, and you got the impression she was a tough-skinned mature woman! And above all, her breasts were huge!

"...Oh-ho-ho. You're giving her a dirty look, Issei."

While I was busy ogling the woman with my lecherous gaze, Akeno fixed me with a heavy stare. It kind of came off like her usual smile...but her presence felt much more foreboding than usual!

No sooner had we entered the room than the blond-haired man spoke up. "Azazel, the facility's operations have begun without issue."

"Yeah. Looks that way, Tamiel. I didn't know you were here."

"Indeed. I dropped by to observe."

The man's tone was awfully casual. Could he be...? I got the feeling I knew who this was.

This time, it was the woman's turn to appraise Akeno and me.

"Oh? I think I've seen this young couple before..." she said to Azazel.

"I'll bet, Penemue. This here's the Red Dragon Emperor, and this is Baraquel's daughter."

The woman—Penemue—broke into a soft smile. "Oh? Has the young couple come to ask Baraquel for his blessing? You'll make him cry!"

Huh, she was teasing us now! Despite her appearance, she also had a very casual way of talking. It was a refreshing sight, the discrepancy between her cool beauty and her easygoing manner.

"These two are Tamiel and Penemue," Azazel said, introducing the pair of fallen angels. "They're executives here, like Sariel. Tamiel is in charge of sales, and Penemue is our chief secretary."

I knew it! They were Grigori bosses, too, just like Bottle Glasses! Hah! Three in one day! So, sales manager and chief secretary. I felt like we had wandered into something bigger than us.

"Geez. If all the top brass are here, headquarters is gonna be understaffed," Azazel muttered, glaring at his two associates.

"You're one to talk, always out and about yourself." Penemue chuckled. "You should show Vice-Governor Shemhazai a little more appreciation, don't you think?"

Yep, you tell him! I agreed completely! Next to me, Akeno was also nodding her head. I know, right?

Yet Azazel didn't seem to care what his colleagues thought of him. "I've told him enough before, so it ain't a problem."

Seriously...? You could show your number two a little more gratitude there, Teach.

Tamiel picked up a stack of papers from the table. "We're finished here, so we'll be leaving soon. With Almaros and Baraqiel managing the place, it should all be fine."

"Speaking of. Know where they are, Tamiel?"

"Making preparations for the Sacred Gear vessels, I suspect."

Azazel and Tamiel then launched into a long conversation, going on about the facility, various research projects, and a bunch of other small, complicated-sounding things.

...Without warning, Penemue gestured for me to come over. Oh! An invitation from a mature beauty! Or so I thought, and yet—

"Not you. It's Baraqiel's daughter I'm interested in. Come over here for a minute. If you're the child of the woman he fell in love with, you must have considerable potential."

"...?"

With an uncertain look, Akeno approached Penemue, and the two kicked up a conversation. Penemue went on for a few sentences, Akeno listening with piqued interest and asking a few follow-up questions... Was I imagining things, or was her sadist mode peeking through there...? What in the world were they talking about?

And so I was left behind, not knowing what to do with myself... At that moment, a certain something caught my eye—the paintings hanging on the walls. They were pictures of people.

"Something up?" Azazel asked, noticing my gaze wandering.

"I was just looking at the paintings, wondering who the people are..."

Azazel shifted his gaze to them. "Ah. Pictures of my friends," he said, his tone unusually sentimental.

"Do they work at other facilities or something?"

"...No. They died a long time ago in battles and what have you."

...I didn't know what to say to that. So these were all pictures of his late friends...

"There are only seven founding members of the Grigori left," he continued. "Me, Vice-Governor Shemhazai, Baraqiel, Sariel from before, Tamiel here, Penemue, and Almaros."

"...Ever since that idiot Kokabiel got himself sent down to Cocytus, that is." Penemue breathed a sad sigh, resting her chin on one hand...

Right, Kokabiel, responsible for so much wrongdoing, was probably considered a longtime comrade here.

"I've had one made for him," Tamiel said, taking out a painting of Kokabiel and fixing it on the wall.

Azazel looked it over thoroughly, then pulled a small Buddhist bell from his pocket and gave it a ring.

"We've lost a lot of good people."

Huh?! What a thing to say! No, hold on a second!

"Death portraits?! Buddhist bells?! You're mixing up your religions here, Teach! Aren't you guys supposed to be connected to the Bible?!"

Seriously, what was up with these fallen angel head honchos conducting Buddhist mourning rites?! Did they do this every time one of them kicked the bucket?!

Azazel let out a hearty laugh. "Don't sweat the small stuff. Anyway, I've got something to discuss with these guys, so you should go find Baraqiel. He's got a training space you might like."

"Shall we take a look at it, Issei? By the way, I have an interesting story for you... Oh-ho."

Was it me, or did Akeno seem unusually excited? Penemue must have lit a fire in her or something. In any event, Akeno and I bowed to the others and left the conference room.

-○●○-

As we moved through the research facility, we passed a rest area set up in front of the training space. I recognized the face of a well-built man seated on one of the benches near the vending machine, or rather...

“Here you are,” Akeno called out.

Yes! It was her father, Baraqiel! The fallen angel was visibly surprised to see his daughter, his drink spraying from his mouth with a loud *Whoosh!*

“A-Akeno!” he gasped, coughing violently. “Wh-what are you doing here...?”

I rushed to pat him on the back. What an unexpected reaction, especially from someone as strict as he was... His daughter’s sudden visit seemed to have thrown him for a loop.

Akeno pulled a plastic container from her paper bag, revealing a delicious-looking simmered dish.

Ah, so this was one of her homemade specialties, simmered chicken and root vegetables. It was a masterpiece, exquisitely seasoned. Serve it with a bowl of rice, and I could eat it all day! Yep, it was my favorite!

Speaking of which, she had served that delicacy just last night. Were these leftovers? Or did she make extra on purpose...?

“I made too much last night, so I’ve brought you a boxed lunch,” she said, also handing him a bento box and a thermos. Rice and miso soup, maybe?

We sat down on the long bench. Busy with maintenance work at the new facility, Baraqiel apparently wasn’t eating well, which made this the perfect opportunity to try his daughter’s home cooking.

Akeno poured a serving of miso soup into the thermos lid.

This only left her father even more confused, but he nervously accepted the proffered drink.

“Th-thank you...”

Baraqiel picked up a piece of chicken with his chopsticks, savored it for a long moment, then took a slurp of the miso soup. Silence stretched out. Akeno and I waited for a reaction, when—all at once, tears gushed from his eyes like twin waterfalls! The next moment, he stuffed his face with more chicken, vegetables, rice, and miso soup!

“Mmm...! Delicious...!” he cried with joy, heartily eating his fill while tears continued to stream down his cheeks!

“Th-this stew is amazing...!” he said, staring up at the sky. “I must be the happiest father in the world...! It’s hard to believe my own daughter made this...!”

He continued to gulp down mouthful after mouthful, while Akeno looked genuinely pleased with herself.

“...You’re exaggerating,” she said, blushing slightly at his reaction.

I could tell, however, that she was indeed happy. Yep, I was glad the two of them had made up.

“Also, I wanted to give you this,” Akeno said, handing Baraqiel a sheet of paper. “There’s going to be a parent-teacher conference at school. Just so you know.”

Ah, the parent-teacher conference. So that was what this was for. Baraqiel sat there stunned for a moment, but he soon grasped his daughter’s implied suggestion.

“A-ah! This is important! Of course I’ll be there!” he said with a forceful nod.

Akeno’s lips curled in a faint smile. “Then my business here is done. You’ve been invited, so please do drop by. And Issei...thank you for coming here with me. Sorry, but I want to tour the facility a little before we leave. I’ll catch up with you later.”

With those words, she rose to her feet and took off somewhere.

Uh-oh. First Gasper, now Akeno had been pulled away. At least my work today was finished. Right?

...But now I was alone with Baraqiel. What an awkward atmosphere! He must

have sensed it, too, as he decided to break the silence. “Are you still nourishing yourself on women’s breasts?”

...?! We still hadn’t cleared up that misunderstanding?! I thought I told him, I wasn’t a woman-feasting dragon!

“Please, gimme a break! Teach made all that up!”

“I’m kidding.”

“That was a joke?!”

Huh? Did Baraqiel actually have a sense of humor? But he still looked so stern! I couldn’t tell if he meant it or not!

The fallen angel cleared his throat. “How about this, then? We have a pretty good training space here. Why not check it out?”

...The training space? I must have been wearing my confusion for all to see, as Baraqiel added, “It’s for Sacred Gear users. So they can master their abilities.”

...! N-now that sounded interesting! I knew the Grigori were interested in protecting Sacred Gear users, but I didn’t know they brought them here to train! Sure, I’d take a look! I had a Sacred Gear of my own, and I ended up being pitted against others all the time. It sounded like it would be well worth it!

And so I decided to check out the Grigori’s new training space.

“...Th-this is it...?”

I swallowed nervously as Baraqiel led me to large set of double doors engraved with the letter G. G for Grigori? After a brief moment, the doors swung open.

I stepped through, when—

“Gwaaah!”

“Nggghhh!”

All of a sudden, screams of anguish assailed my ears! Huh?! Wh-what the...?! Taken aback, I followed carefully after Baraqiel.

He led me into a wide corridor lined with glass walls, through which I could see the rooms beyond.

“Auuuggghh! I’m not done yet, dammit!”

In one, a crucified man was being struck by a huge wrecking ball hanging from a crane.

“What are you doing to me, Grigori?! Ngghhh!”

In another, a figure was strapped to an operating table, desperately crying out while a group of suspicious figures surrounding him set to work... Wh-what the...?

I was left at a total loss. Wasn’t this supposed to be where they trained Sacred Gear users...? I glimpsed into room after room as we headed down the passageway...

It wasn’t just the huge wrecking ball and the mysterious surgery—there were also people being submerged underwater, held down by ponderous weights, as well as operating rooms equipped with drills and saws!

“U-um, Baraqiel...? What *is* all this...?” I asked nervously.

No matter how you looked at it, this wasn’t what he had described earlier!

“Hmm? This is the training floor. Take a good look. We’re helping them all to better themselves.”

This was training?! Whaaat?! The rooms looked more like torture chambers! I could feel my anxiety getting the better of me as I broke into a cold sweat. Come to think of it, this place *was* run by fallen angels...

...Hold on. Saji was brought here after the battle with Loki. He had been tight-lipped about the place when he came back, the only thing I remember him saying being “I don’t want to remember!” Right, he had been trembling uncontrollably, too.

A bad feeling washed over me—the kind that signaled I was about to get caught up in something I would rather not.

The next moment, Baraqiel spoke up. “We recruit and give shelter to Sacred Gear users who lack anyone else to rely on, and we teach them how to use their powers.”

Right... But how did what I just saw help them...? It looked like plain old

torture to me... Then again, Azazel had subjected me to training bordering on torture as well.

In fact, surviving on a rugged mountain range while being hunted by a dragon might well be more grueling than all this, I thought, forcing a smile.

Well, leaving that aside, this was a good opportunity to ask Baraquel a few questions.

“What happens to them once they get a handle on their abilities?”

I could see how the fallen angels’ research could ultimately make lives easier for people with Sacred Gears...but I couldn’t help wondering what happened to them at the end of it all.

“In the past—before the accord between the three great powers—we would have kept them within our organization. Now, however, the situation has changed somewhat. If they want to live as ordinary humans, we try to grant their wishes, albeit with some restrictions,” Baraquel answered.

Maybe not in the past, but it sounded like they could now go back to living normal lives. Intriguing.

I wanted to know more; I really did. Probably because I myself had a Sacred Gear, as did plenty of my friends. But before I could ask Baraquel to keep going, another voice spoke up.

“Hah, if it ain’t Baraquel! Gwa-ha-ha!”

It was a loud, hearty laugh. Glancing around, I spotted a well-built man poking his head out of one of the rooms we had just walked by.

...I felt my brows coming together in a stern frown.

The man was wearing armor and a helmet and had a cloak draped over his shoulders. He also had one eye hidden behind an eyepatch, sported an unkempt beard, and for some incomprehensible reason, he clutched a shield in his left hand and an ax in his right! The helmet was modeled after a hawk or an eagle, and the same design was emblazoned on the surface of the shield as well!

He couldn’t have looked any more like a cartoon villain if he tried! One from

decades ago, at that! He was a total weirdo!

“Ah, Almaros. You’re here,” Baraqiel called out, accepting his freakish appearance without question!

Did he know him?! These people were all out of their minds!

“This is Almaros, another Grigori executive,” Baraqiel said, introducing him. “He spends most of his time researching attacks to break through magic—anti-magic, you might say.”

“Gwa-ha-ha! When it comes to anti-magic, I’m your man!”

So this crackpot was a Grigori leader?! Then again, the governor himself wasn’t exactly playing with a full deck, either!

I mean, that getup! He didn’t *look* like an anti-magic practitioner! Heck, an ax and shield were about as far from that description as I could imagine!

“Almaros. This is Issei Hyoudou, the Red Dragon Emperor,” Baraqiel said.

Now it was my turn to address this cartoon villain...

“Um... Nice to meet you. I’m Issei—”

Before I could even finish talking, Almaros swung his ax! Eeek! A surprise attack?! I managed to dodge it purely by reflex, but what the heck?! The next moment, the old geezer pointed his weapon my way!

“I know all about you, Breast Dragon! You here to wreck our hideout?!”

Huh?! H-he was swinging his ax around in a rage, babbling utter nonsense!

“It’s been a hundred years since our last battle! Time to settle this score once and for all!”

“What score?! Do you and the Breast Dragon have a history?! Did I do something to you?! Because I don’t remember anything!”

Excited, Almaros snapped his fingers—and a bunch of people clad in black body suits emblazoned with hawk or eagle designs stepped out from each of the rooms, wailing in strange voices! One look and it was clear they were fighters, gathering around me and Almaros!

Gooo! they cried.

“Baraquel! What’s all this?!” I shouted.

“Hmm. Grigori fighters.”

“Seriously?! First I’ve heard of them! I’ve been dealing with fallen angels for half a year now, and I’ve never seen anything like this before!”

Did fallen angels become stupider the higher they rose in rank?! I mean, Azazel was at the very top! Was that why Vali had left the group?!

“Gwa-ha-ha!” Almaros chortled as his henchmen took their places around us. “There ain’t no escape now, Breast Dragon! This hideout belongs to the great Grigori—and we’re gonna conquer the world! No one who sets foot here gets out alive! *Griigori!!*”

Griigori!!, the henchmen all shouted in perfect unison. Come on, could they be any more like an enemy organization?! I only came here as Akeno’s escort, but these guys were coming out with lines like *You won’t leave this place alive!* Even the Grigori foot soldiers were shouting and doing cartwheels around me and Almaros!

“Sorry, Issei Hyoudou,” Baraquel said with a troubled look. “Almaros is a huge fan of Japanese superhero TV shows... Azazel is no better. He’s constantly encouraging him. They’re always like this.”

...S-so that was it. Seriously, though?! Why were these high-ranking fallen angels taking inspiration from cartoon superhero villains?!

“Almaros, I’ve brought him here to see how we train our Sacred Gear users. This is just—”

Baraquel stopped, doing a double take and finding himself at a sudden loss for words. Something in one of the rooms must have caught his attention. Puzzled, I peeked inside to take a look, when—

“Oh dear. It’s no fun when you give up too easily. Oh-ho, how about some thunder? Or a whip?”

It was a familiar face in a BDSM queen costume!

“Argh! Y-your Majestyyy! Please, train me hardeeerrr!” wailed a Sacred Gear user while being lashed again and again by a lightning whip!

Baraqiel's mouth fell open, his eyes bulging from their sockets. "A-A-Akenooo?!"

That's right! It was Akeno! She was dressed in a stylish BDSM outfit and wielding a whip, but that was her true self on display! And she didn't stop! Actually, it looked pretty good on her. She sure seemed to be enjoying herself, like she was born to wield that whip!

Her expression was that of a sadistic dominatrix, and the man being whipped looked like a total masochist!

Almaros chortled with laughter. "She's our latest candidate member. Sounds like Penemue sent her our way, but she's a pretty good dominatrix, eh? Can't wait to see what else she's got in store! Gwa-ha-ha!"

Huuuh?! So *that* was what Penemue wanted with her?! An offer to let Akeno's inner sadist out? No wonder she was all ears!

"M-my daughter... Hmm..."

Uh-oh! Overcome with shock, Baraqiel fell flat on the floor!

"Gwa-ha-ha! All right. Nab the Breast Dragon!"

"Gooo!" Almaros's henchmen called out as they surrounded me.

"Huhhh?!"

Before I knew it, they were literally carrying me away—straight into a training room!

...Rising up before me were a crucifix and a massive wrecking ball hanging from a crane. The image of the man being hit by it just a few minutes ago flashed again in the back of my mind. Even for a demon, it would be utterly excruciating!

"Here's what works when you're training up a Sacred Gear user!" Almaros shouted from in front of the wrecking ball. "Iron! Overcome this, and you'll awaken your true powers! This is how we've powered up all our comic book heroes! You, too, Breast Dragon, can have a taste!"

"Wouldn't any normal person die after being hit by that?! This is supposed to be training to awaken a Sacred Gear?! And what's all that about comic book

heroes...?!"

I was so taken aback, my eyes could have popped right out of their sockets! Where was the connection between Sacred Gears and a huge iron ball?! Was that supposed to unlock your Balance Breaker if you could endure the pain?!

"Vritra's vessel, Saji Genshirou, withstood this iron ball and later underwent remodeling surgery!" Almaros said matter-of-factly.

Seriously?! He had to go through this as well?! And that stuff with all the drills and saws?! Damn... No wonder he didn't want to talk about his time here when he got back...!

"Look closely. Here's the proof." Almaros pulled out a picture.

It was taken from behind, but it did look like Saji. And he had a huge letter *G* engraved on his back. Huuuh?!

"This is how you can tell someone's undergone a Grigori remodeling surgery. The Grigori's science and technology regenerated Saji Genshirou into a Vritra monster!"

"A Vritra monster?! S-so that Vritra Promotion was your doing?!"

"He's the pride of the Grigori, that monster is!"

Was he saying their surgery and tattoo gave Saji Dragon King powers?! And that the Vritra monster was his true form?!

Did Saji even know all this? He hadn't mentioned the marking on his back, so probably not... It sounded like he got himself branded completely unawares...

Look! See? Get involved with Azazel, and you risk getting transformed into a bona fide monster!

Almaros nodded. "When you wanna teach a Sacred Gear vessel, the first step is an iron ball! Or you can strengthen 'em through surgery! Or you can make 'em train with dragons up on a remote mountain! It's been scientifically verified and theoretically proven!"

"Those three are the only options?! Wrecking balls, enhancement surgery, and surviving a dragon?! C-come on, we Sacred Gear users can't be that simple! Y-you're telling me *that's* what your research shows?! Hold on, aren't you

supposed to specialize in anti-magic?!"

"When you wanna counter magic, you need an overwhelming physical attack! Beat those magic users to death! Puny weaklings, relying on cheap magic tricks! Just hit 'em where it hurts! Gwa-ha-ha!"

"Physical attacks?! Beat them to death?! You had to research that?!"

Did this guy fall from Heaven for sheer stupidity?! It sure looked that way!

"Just in time. They're about to start the surgery in the next room over. Take a look!"

The next moment, a huge monitor on the wall started showing the situation in the other room—someone tied to an operating table! And a bunch of suspicious-looking doctors had him surrounded! Hold on, was that...?!

"U-um... Will this really make me a stronger vampire? I heard about the Grigori's research, so I wanted to take a look, but this..."

It was Gasper, nervously addressing the dubious doctors! How had he ended up in there?!

Up on the screen, Bottle Glasses—Sariel—adjusted his spectacles. *"Of course. Theoretically, this surgery should help you unlock tremendous power! That's what it's all about! Now, allow yourself to be reborn!"*

Sariel snapped his fingers—and with that, one of the doctors revved a chain saw!

Rrr-rrr-rrr!

A dangerous sound blasted out from the display!

"Eeek! W-will this really make me—"

Before Gasper could even finish his sentence, the feed on the display was replaced with static! Uh-oh... Was he okay in there...?

When the image flicked back on, Baraqiel was tied to a cross while Akeno leaned over him in a dominatrix outfit!

"Looks like our new female candidate member is about to start purging!" Almaros beamed, eyes glued to the screen.

P-purge...? What was going to happen to him...?

Akeno approached Baraquel with her whip.

“A-Akeno!” he cried out. “Why are you dressed like that?! It’s indecent! Shuri would never forgive me for letting you do this!”

Akeno’s only response to these pleas, however, was a wicked smile. *“Father. Penemue told me everything.”*

“...Sh-she did?”

“Yes... She said you and Mother used to play games like this!”

Whip!

Akeno cracked her whip, delivering a sharp blow to Baraquel’s chest! Her own father! I—I couldn’t see him putting up with this!

Yet what happened next was beyond my wildest imagination.

Receiving a second blow to his abdomen, he started shaking all over. *“...Yes,”* he sighed, a look of pure bliss washing over him!

Yes?! W-was he enjoying this?! I couldn’t believe what I was watching! Yet Akeno lifted the whip back into the air!

Whip! Whip!

Again and again, the whip cracked through the air—and each time, an unimaginable gasp escaped Baraquel’s warrior mouth!

“Aaah! That’s it! Yes! Just like when Shuri did it!”

Just like when his wife did it?! That’s too much information!

“I can’t believe you did this with Mother every night! What kind of man are you?! You really are a fallen angel!”

More shocking revelations, this time from Akeno!

“Eeeh?! Baraquel played BDSM games with his wife?!” I gasped.

It was Almaros who answered. “Hmm. Baraquel might come off as a tough, seasoned warrior at first glance, choosing a pure and delicate Japanese beauty as his wife. But behind the scenes, he was a kinky masochist, and she was a

dominant sadist. You catch what I'm saying? Every night, they'd get all fired up. Gwa-ha-ha! Baraqiel's impure heart was what got him kicked outta Heaven!"

Seriously...? Whoa, what a shock! I always considered him serious and down-to-earth, basically the Grigori's conscience in contrast to their superhero-loving executives and their prankster governor!



I never would have taken the master of Holy Lightning for a masochist!

"Ah, Akeno! You wield that whip like your mom did! I—I'm so lucky...! Aaah, yes! Yeeesss!"

I didn't want to hear it! Why did every leader I respected have to be a total pervert?! Even in the demon world, Sirzechs had a sister complex of epic proportions! The entire underworld was a den of sin and corruption!

"Oh-ho-ho! Father! It's time I took over from Mother and gave you a good spanking! You Holy Lightning masochist!"

Despite the sadistic cast to Akeno's face, there was still a sense of playfulness about her... B-but was this really okay, this sort of parent-child interaction...?

Ah, I wanted to engage in a little BDSM action with her, too!

So her sadistic tendencies came from her mother! A masochistic father and a sadistic mother—what a background!

Huh?! Azazel suddenly popped up in the BDSM room on the monitor! He sure loved to turn up when you least expected it!

"All right! You both realize I'm a teacher at Kuou Academy, yeah? So let's have us a parent-teacher conference! Baraqiel! Seems Akeno wants to go to college. What are your thoughts?"

What the...?! A parent-teacher meeting in a place like this?! Could he pick a worse time and place?!

"I'm all for it, Master Azazel! College is the way to go to expand your knowledge and increase your horizons! Aaahhh! Yeeesss!"

"Thank you, Father! You look very excited...! Oops!"

Whip!

Akeno's whip struck Azazel!

"Nnnggghhh!" he groaned. "That's the stuff! An exquisite impact, right in your opponent's erogenous zones! You've got a natural talent! Damn! A parent-teacher conference communicating through a whip! What incredible insight!"

Enough! How could he say all that with such an enlightened look?!

The screen switched to static again, changing scenes for the third time and returning to the operating room with Gasper. Indeed, there he was—head, arms, and legs sticking out from a cardboard box lying flat on the operating table.

“The surgery was a success,” Bottle Glasses (Sariel) exclaimed, breathing a sigh like he had just come home from a hard day’s work.

“What does that mean?! Did they plant his head and limbs in a cardboard box?! Or is he just wearing it?! What kind of surgery was that?!”

And yet...

The cardboard box’s flaps swung open, revealing a small missile mounted inside.

“I feel like a new person. Today’s a turning point in my life...”

Gasper was babbling nonsense again!

Snap out of it! How can you call that a turning point?!

Looking on, Almaros let out a low groan. “Ngh! So it’s come to this, Sariel! Equipping a vampire with missiles! I’m not sure what to make of it, but it’s a bold strategy, exuding power and strength! A Missile Vampire!”

“No, no, no! Just because you’ve given him missiles doesn’t mean he’s any stronger! I mean, missiles in a vampire box?! What sort of research has he been doing?!”

The next moment, Sariel launched into a monologue on the wall-mounted display as if to answer my question: *“Hee-hee-hee. My latest research project—How will the enemy react when encountering a monster armed with unexpected equipment?—is complete. A cardboard box, disguised as a delivery—yet inside is a vampire, along with missiles! No enemy could expect this. Once we’ve tested it in practical combat, we’ll move on to the second phase: How will the enemy react when encountering a dragon combined with a tank? We’ve just gotten our hands on a legendary heavenly dragon, so I can’t wait to get started!”*

...Hold on, was I his next piece of research material?!

“Hee-hee-hee... So I’m to be docked with a tank? A tank-equipped Breast

Dragon... Why can't I stop crying...?"

Ddraig was in tears?! He was extra sensitive lately, and even the smallest surprise had him bawling his eyes out!

At this rate, Sariel was going to end up turning me into a dragon tank! This was no joke! I had to get out of here, even if it meant leaving Akeno and Gasper behind! If I stayed, they would do all sorts of terrible things to me!

Akeno was still caught up in her BDSM parent-teacher conference! It would be rude to interrupt!

And Gaspy, reborn as a Missile Vampire—he was a good guy! I would never forget him!

But before I could sneak away, a hand rested on my shoulder. I glanced around, and there he was—that cartoon villain Almaros, fixing me with a broad grin!

“It’s time we got started, Breast Dragon.”

With a snap of his fingers, he summoned his minions, swiftly restraining me with a loud *Gooo!* No! What now?!

Before I knew it, they were tying me to the crucifix! H-hey, wait!

Then, the crane started moving, the wrecking ball swinging straight for Almaros!

Sharpening his gaze, he lashed out with his ax—cleaving the wrecking ball clean in two!

“Attack magic is powerful stuff. Hit one with a normal counter, and you’ll just get yourself struck down. So what are you supposed to do? Simple! Train yourself till you can withstand magic head-on! A well-trained body can deflect all sorts of elemental attacks! Anti-magic is all about physical defense and physical offense! About withstanding magic—then punching your enemies in the face to kill ‘em! There’s the results of my anti-magic research! So come on, Breast Dragon! Time to be dyed in the colors of the Grigori! We’ll train you up with this here iron ball till you’re immune to magic! Gwa-ha-ha! Today, the hero of the underworld falls under the Grigori’s spell!”

This brawn-for-brains fallen angel went on at length, none of it making the slightest bit of sense!

Then he snapped his fingers, and his henchmen brought out another wrecking ball!

I still didn't see the connection between wrecking balls and anti-magic—but the huge iron sphere was already swinging my way!

"Nooo! Help meee!"

My screams echoed throughout the room.

To think, if it hadn't been Kokabiel who'd attacked Kuou Academy, but this cartoon villain mad scientist here—yep, it would have been way more chaotic.

Thank goodness it was Kokabiel!

Later, I learned that the training space was intended to develop mental discipline by forcing subjects to endure hardship, and that proper Sacred Gear training was conducted at a separate location.

Why didn't they take me there?! Damn Grigori! They were a bunch of perverted psychos, every last one of them!

Episode Issei.5

...I still remembered that trip to the Grigori facility like it was yesterday.

And Baraqiel! I was so touched when he made up with Akeno, but that BDSM father-daughter spectacle at the end just ruined it!

Chairwoman Sona elegantly sipped her cup of tea while listening to Rossweisse's anti-magic lecture.

"Well, perhaps raw power can break through magic in some cases. Certainly, if you possessed transcendent physical strength. Sairaorg Bael could deflect magic attacks with his bare hands, for instance. Perhaps you can as well, Issei?"

Me...? Right, my Dragon Blaster could tear through a whole swathe of enemies in one hit.

If Kiba were here, I could use his support to pull it off.

As for Sairaorg... His strength and agility were off the charts, and that Lion's Robe of his only amplified them even more. To be perfectly honest, I doubted I would even be able to beat him once he combined with the Regulus. He was that good.

Just as Cao Cao proved, there was nothing more frightening than power and technique pushed to their absolute limits.

"W-well, *Sairaorg* could probably parry an attack with his bare hands... I get the feeling he and Almaros would hit it off pretty well," I mused, rubbing my cheek. Yep, they would make great friends.

"Kuroka! I found it!"

Ah, Koneko. Sure enough, she and Gasper were beside the pool, Kuroka caught in their sights.

"If it isn't Shirone and Gaspy, *meow*. Want to go for a swim?" Kuroka was

resting by the pool after taking a long swim, a kimono draped over her body covering only the important parts.

"Train me! That's part of the reason you're allowed to stay here!" Koneko demanded. She could be rather strict with her older sister.

"K-Koneko? You can train with me anytime..."

"You're like Issei, Gaspy, always giving in to her."

Now that was harsh! Though I had noticed she seemed to enjoy training with her sister. I hoped it wouldn't be too long before they had a proper reconciliation.

Just as Kuroka, accompanied by Koneko and Gasper, strolled by, she blurted out, "Hey, hey, Red Dragon Emperor. Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

She pointed to Le Fay. "If you're looking for a mage pact, why not go with Le Fay here?"

"—!"

Everyone was taken aback by that unexpected proposal!

That was only natural. Seriously?! Le Fay?! For a mage pact?!

"K-Kuroka?!" The person in question was as shocked as the rest of us. Clearly, she hadn't even considered this idea.

"She's a skilled mage, you know, from a prestigious family?" Kuroka continued, brushing her wet hair out of her face. "And she's a huge fan, *meow*. A perfect fit, don'tcha think?"

Th-there was a certain logic to it...

Kuroka shrugged. "Arthur's a bit of an outcast in the Pendragon family. He took the Holy King Sword, a precious family heirloom and a national treasure, and ran off looking for strong challengers. But Le Fay, she was all worried about her big brother and ended up chasing after him. She was supposed to take over as the Pendragon family sorcerer, you know?"

...

No, I hadn't known. So she ran away from home to help her brother?

"My mother and father were so worried about him..." Le Fay said, fidgeting.

So that was what happened. Indeed, she did stand out among Team Vali's other members.

She certainly didn't have the personality of a terrorist.

Ravel, however, was the first to raise an objection. "I'm sorry I have to say this...but you're terrorists. That's a simple fact. Even if you left the Khaos Brigade, you're a wanted fugitive with several major factions... I know this sounds harsh, but I have to consider Issei's position..."

Ravel...

I was moved! She always had my best interests at heart! Really, I couldn't ask for more in a manager...!

"Well, I guess there's not much I can say to that," Kuroka said with a forced grin. "You left off how she's been expelled from her old mage organization." Nonetheless, she pressed her hands together pleadingly. "But come on, at least give her an interview, Little Birdie."

"It's Ravel!" she fired back. "And I can't even consider a terrorist for Issei's partner!"

"I mean, I *am* kind of curious," I said. "And she's done us favors before. It's okay just to ask her a few questions, right?"

I didn't think she was a bad person, and I *was* interested.

Would it really be so bad if we considered her as a candidate?

Ravel's lips came together in a frown, but she gave me a reluctant nod nonetheless. "...If that's what you want, I can't say no. Very well... Le Fay!"

"Y-yes!" she answered, visibly apprehensive.

"Answer my questions truthfully!"

"I—I understand!"

The next moment, Ravel pulled out a notepad and began shooting off questions, which Le Fay, visibly nervous, responded to one by one.

"...Hmm. So you can use black magic, white magic, Norse magic, and spirit magic... And your contracted familiars...Fenrir?! G-Gogmagog?! U-unbelievable...!"

Unable to hide her astonishment, Ravel continued her questioning for a short while until her pen came to a stop.

"...What on earth?" she muttered, her face awash with disbelief.

"Wh-what's wrong?" I asked cautiously.

"I devised a set of criteria for any mage partners you might consider, and she exceeds every last one of them. By a considerable margin, in fact. In many respects, she's a superior candidate for the options I've shortlisted so far..."

Hmm. I see.

"She has an impressive background," Ravel continued, her interest piqued. "If not for the fact that she's a terrorist, she would make a great partner."

Wow! That was one heck of an assessment. In other words, if she wasn't with Team Vali, she would be good to go! Huh. I had never considered the possibility.

Maybe I *could* contract her as my mage partner!

She was cute, immensely skilled, and I could easily see her developing magic that would prove beneficial in my demon life.

It was just that whole terrorism thing that stood in the way...

"...It's a heavy burden, your association with the Khaos Brigade," Chairwoman Sona said in a soft voice.

Really, that was the only problem. I understood her worrying about her brother, but a stint with a terrorist group at odds with so many major factions, even if only temporary, wasn't a good thing to put on your résumé...

"..."

Le Fay herself looked conflicted.

Perhaps hoping to clear the air, Kuroka let out a dry laugh. "Well, things might turn around one day. Sounds like she scored highly, though, *meow...* By the way, Shirone, someone's snatched your territory."

Ah. Yeah, Xenovia had perched herself on my lap. Koneko liked to consider it her own...

“...I’ll reclaim it later, so it’s fine. It’s a neutral region.”

Were my thighs really that important?! Today was just full of surprises!

Bennia, the grim reaper girl, was jotting something down on her notepad under the table.

“Ho-ho, so the Breast Dragon’s lap is considered a neutral region... I’m learning so much.”

Right! She blended into the background so much, I had completely forgotten about her.

At that moment, a new voice called out: “An underground swimming pool? That does sound fun.”

We glanced around—to find a woman in a nun’s outfit! Sister Griselda! She was Heaven’s representative in the town and its surrounding area, in charge of its local staff!

Accompanied by two men, she walked up toward us. “Apologies. I dropped by your home, Issei Hyoudou, and your parents told me I could find you here.”

Huh?! Were we so caught up in conversation that we hadn’t even noticed we had visitors?!

Thank you, Mom! Almost all our members were downstairs in the basement here, so it was little wonder we hadn’t noticed!

“Greetings,” she said, offering us a polite smile.

Xenovia, still perched on my lap, froze at the sight of the approaching nun. Irina had already taken a step back, standing at full attention!

Still smiling, Griselda tugged at Xenovia’s cheek. “How shameless you’ve become, sitting on a gentleman’s lap in the middle of the day.”

“Eeek! I—I’m sowwy...,” Xenovia apologized, tears welling in her eyes.

Ah, another glimpse at her cute side. She just couldn’t hold her own against Sister Griselda, could she?

With a feigned cough, Griselda bowed her head. “I must apologize. I heard Ms. Gremory and Ms. Sitri were having a discussion, so I thought I might join you...”

Akeno and Chairwoman Sona sat up, offering her a warm welcome.

“Not at all. It’s our pleasure.”

“Please, sit. Would you like some tea?”

“Thank you.”

She took a seat at the table, though my attention was already somewhere else.

...The two men she had brought with her. One was a neat-looking youth with blond hair and green eyes, maybe three or four years my senior. He was wearing a priest’s frock.

The other was Japanese. He was around the same height I was and carried himself like one of those handsome Adonises. He might have been one or two years older than me. And yet...

“...”

He had a large dog by his side, its fur jet-black and its golden eyes gleaming brightly.

...I could tell from its aura that this was no ordinary dog.

Was it a spirit of some kind...? No, it had a mystical sense about it...

Only one possibility came to mind.

At that moment, the priest broke into a wide smile and turned to me. “Hello. It’s a pleasure to meet you, demons of Kuou Academy. My name is Dulio Gesualdo. I can’t wait to get to know you all.”

—?! D-Dulio?! Did that mean...?

“...Joker,” Chairwoman Sona murmured.

Right, that was the name of Archangel Michael’s Joker, a reincarnated angel up in Heaven! Naturally, we were all thrown for a loop.

Dulio himself, however, looked our female members over one by one. “Ah. I’ve heard about the Red Dragon Emperor’s beautiful wives, but I see it’s true. My jealousy cannot be overstated.”

“Dulio?” Sister Griselda interrupted. “Don’t forget yourself. You’re Heaven’s Joker, its trump card. Be respectful,” she said, tugging at his ear.

“Ow... Geez. There’s no winning with you.”

Was Griselda managing not just Xenovia, but this Joker as well...?

Azazel and Griselda had debated whether or not to play this trump card when the Carmilla vampires visited, but I hadn’t expected to meet him so soon.

...Was this a sign of how seriously the Khaos Brigade’s recent actions were being taken...?

“And him...?” Akeno asked, her gaze shifting to the other man with his black dog.

But before Griselda could answer, Kuroka spoke up: “Now *this* is unusual, *meow*. Vali is going to kick himself for missing this.”

“Do you know him, Kuroka?” I asked.

She flashed me a sly grin. “He’s Slash Dog, the guy with the Canis Lycaon. Apart from Cao Cao, the only human Vali’s had to use his Juggernaut Drive against.”

—?! Th-this guy here?! Just how many surprises were in store for us today?!

We all turned around in shock to hear this man was the famous Slash Dog!

Anyone would have been taken aback with these unreadable visitors popping in one after the other! After all, he was our second Longinus user for the day.

“Hey. I’m Tobio Ikuse. Former Governor Azazel asked me to be here. This dog is my blade. You can think of it as my Longinus itself. Basically, it’s an autonomous Sacred Gear and has a mind of its own. I’m looking forward to supporting you all behind the scenes.”

So he was introducing the dog to us... Ah, so the dog itself was a Sacred Gear? Had it developed a free will after the fact, like the Regulus? No, something told

me it had been this way from the very beginning...

Seriously, Sacred Gears came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. I was starting to see why Azazel was so obsessed with them.

So the Slash Dog was going to be our newest support member? It sure was reassuring to know we had him guarding our backs.

“...Ah, I see. That dog really is flawless,” Xenovia murmured.

“Yep. He’s cute, but there’s something really formidable lurking inside him,” Irina added.

Both wore grim expressions as they took in the dog’s—or rather, the blade’s—unique aura.

“It seems we’ve successfully gathered most of the Sacred Gear users from the three great powers in one place,” Chairwoman Sona said as she adjusted her glasses.

If Sairaorg and the Regulus had been here, that would have been all three major factions’ Longinuses—quite the gathering.

Wow, this really was something! The Occult Research Club and the Student Council had always helped each other out, but it was reassuring to know we had reinforcements from Heaven and the Grigori!

If we were going to be pitted against an evil dragon in the future, we would need at least this many members. The more people we had, the smaller the risk any of us might suffer a fatal injury. To be perfectly honest, if we in the Gremory Familia ended up fighting something like that alone, it would probably end with at least one of us dying.

I had to get stronger to make sure that never happened.

There I was imagining the worst when Slash Dog called out to me: “Red Dragon Emperor. You’re training today?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. Why?”

“Azazel asked me to fill in for Yuuto Kiba as your sparring partner. Is that okay with you?”

—! Seriously?! W-wow! What an honor!

I nodded my head, reaching out to grasp his hand. “Definitely! It isn’t every day you get to practice with a Longinus user!”

This was a rare opportunity! It would be a great experience—not only for me, but for the entire Gremory Familia!

Every Longinus user I had faced so far had been either an opponent or an enemy... They weren’t the kind of people to spar with you in a training bout.

Next to him, Heaven’s Joker raised his hand. “Ah, Lord Michael asked me the same thing. So how about it, Red Dragon Emperor, Gremory Familia—fancy a practice match?”

Whoa! Talk about a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Had we won the lottery or something?!

“The Joker, too?! Definitely, definitely! Azazel’s told me all about you. You’re up there with Cao Cao, right?”

Heaven’s Joker shook his head. “Hmm... Maybe if the conditions were right? You don’t need to be so formal with me, by the way. I hate it when people use titles all the time. Just call me Dulio. And I’ll call you Issei.”

With a warm smile, the Joker—Dulio—reached out to shake my hand.

He had a carefree attitude, but he didn’t come off as a bad person. The same went for Slash Dog.

Xenovia and Irina, I couldn’t help but notice, were burning with excitement.

“This is awesome! It isn’t every day you get to train with a bunch of Longinus users! I’m all fired up!”

“Me too! I want to improve my angel powers!”

“Yeah. As a self-proclaimed angel, you could learn a lot from the real thing.”

“Ngh! Maybe *you* can learn a little technique from Slash Dog!”

“You’re both raring to go! I’ll try to improve my coordination with Fafnir!” Asia said, watching her fellow Church Trio members bicker.

Yep, the three of them were as lively as ever.

Chairwoman Sona raised a hand into the air to speak. “If you don’t mind, could we invite Vritra as well? It’s about time he unlocked his Balance Breaker, and with you all to help him, I reckon there would be a high probability of success.”

Dulio nodded. “Sure, why not? We can throw the dragon king into the mix.”

Balance Breaker training, huh? With these members, it might actually work. It sure wasn’t going to be easy, though. After all, there were a full three of us, myself included, carrying Longinuses here.

Sorry about this, Saji, but I’m not going to take it easy on you!

The Joker, Dulio, and Slash Dog, Tobio Ikuse, had succeeded in lifting everyone’s spirits.

A moment, later, Sister Griselda spoke up. “Those terrorists have been making some unsettling moves lately. Each faction needs to work to improve the abilities of their younger members. Unfortunately, most influential figures in the various camps are in senior positions, which makes it difficult for them to move politically. We can’t afford to lose our leadership—especially our principal leaders. As such, we need strong young talent capable of being deployed at a moment’s notice. I ask you to lend us your strength—not only for the three great powers, but for each and every mythological system and the human world. We’ll do our utmost to support you.” She stopped there, bowing her head.

“Raise your head, Sister,” I said. “When the time comes, we’ll do whatever needs to be done. Nothing beats peace, though.”

To be perfectly honest, I would have been happy just to live a peaceful and erotic life with all the girls here, but since I was the Red Dragon Emperor, all sorts of crazy enemies kept coming my way.

The road to becoming a harem king wasn’t easy. But I had to keep going.

...Rias, Asia, Akeno, Koneko, Kiba, Xenovia, Gasper, Irina, Rossweisse, Ravel, Ophis, Azazel, everyone in the student council—I had had more than enough of seeing them suffer...

There might be more conflicts in the future, but for as long as I could, as much

as I could, I would do my best for them all so we could live together in peace and harmony.

While I sat there renewing my resolve, Dulio was helping himself to the sweets on the table. “Well, the higher-ups have already been talking about bringing us together. Lord Michael said it pains his heart to see Issei and you all getting thrown in hot water all the time. Us meeting up from time to time wouldn’t be a bad thing, if you ask me.”

Thank you, Michael! Having the Joker and Slash Dog as training partners was a huge relief! And what an honor to have Heaven and the Grigori sending us their young talents!

“All right, everyone!” I shouted enthusiastically. “Let’s get training!”

“Yeah!” Xenovia and the others answered.

“We need to talk about that other situation first,” Chairwoman Sona said calmly.

Ah, right.

W-well, things were fine here in the Hyoudou residence, but how were Rias, Kiba, and Azazel faring in the vampire territory?

I hoped they were okay.

Episode Azazel.1

A town shrouded in thick fog...

I—Azazel—found myself in territory at the heart of the vampire Carmilla clan.

Vampires had a reputation for living in Medieval-European-style buildings possessed of an old-fashioned charm, but that stereotype didn't necessarily hold true in reality.

In this town, modern buildings surrounded the Carmilla's central castle in concentric circles. They were all of contemporary construction. That being said, the pureblooded vampires, the ones with all the authority here, did indeed seem to live in sprawling, old-fashioned mansions.

Naturally, given vampires' innate weakness to sunlight, there were few windows to be found, and the doors were securely closed.

On top of that, there was the fog. Sunlight didn't reach the ground here even at the height of day.

It was currently broad daylight, time for vampires, denizens of the night, to sleep. There were a few infrequent passersby moving about the town, but they were all dressed in thick clothing to keep their skin from being exposed. Perhaps even the fog wasn't enough to assuage their fear of sunlight. Some were even traveling by car. The town's buildings and infrastructure weren't altogether different from those usually found in the human world, no doubt because most of its residents used to be human themselves. In that respect, it wasn't entirely dissimilar to places inhabited by reincarnated demons in the underworld.

The fog itself was the result of vampire abilities. Vampires, after all, had the power to manipulate fog—a high-ranking one could probably generate enough to cover an entire town.

To them, fog also functioned to erect barriers and provide surveillance. While not quite as impressive as the Longinus user Georg, a vampire who could enshroud an entire town in fog was unquestionably an individual of immense power.

After parting from Rias, I entered this isolated territory alone, passing through a vast barrier separating these remote mountains from the human world beyond. And now I was here.

Incidentally, the Tsepesh territory wasn't too far away. The two sides, it seemed, had created a barrier or border between them.

My breath was white. Romania experienced a similar seasonal cycle as Japan, but by the time winter arrived in Tokyo, here it had long since settled in. It was colder here, too. I wouldn't have been surprised to find snow lying about.

So why was I leisurely admiring the townscape...?

“Talk about boring...”

All alone, I found a unique café open during the daylight hours, where I sat drinking a cup of tea on the second-floor terrace.

And yes, it was tea, not blood—a kind of strong-flavored black tea popular among vampires. It was said they had a different palate from that of regular humans. Pureblooded vampires couldn't tolerate anything but blood, so those who enjoyed this tea must have been former humans.

Anyway, that wasn't important. My point is this—I was so bored in this vampire town that I had resorted to drinking tea.

I had requested a meeting with Queen Carmilla herself, leader of her self-named clan, but she was supposedly preoccupied with another matter.

On top of that, whatever her prior engagement was, it seemed to be dragging on, as I had been here for several days now. Sure, they welcomed me at the castle and gave me all the VIP bells and whistles, but with too much free time on my hands, I decided to venture into the town.

Frankly, all this idleness was embarrassing after I had made such a big fuss about coming here.

...My guess was that the Tsepesh were making a move of some sort, which meant the Carmilla clan would be devising countermeasures. They would probably put off meeting me until they were all done and dusted.

They weren't ignoring me as such. In fact, the figure a few seats away seemed to be keeping tabs on me. There was no mistaking his presence everywhere I went.

Maybe Queen Carmilla wanted to have all her cards in order before seeing me.

Was this vampire nobility on display? Their idea of integrity? I mean, seriously, leaving visitors to their own devices after having your previous envoy mouth off to them like the Carmilla had?

Unable to make heads or tails of the situation, I breathed a resigned sigh... And at that moment, the presence of the guard watching over me all but disappeared. Glancing over, I saw him lying flat over the table.

This time, I heaved an even deeper sigh. "Tch. What is it now, Vali?"

Sure enough, approaching my seat was none other than Vali himself.

"Oh, I was just passing by when I sensed a familiar presence."

With him were Bikou, Arthur, and Fenrir.

"Hiya, Governor! Oh, wait. It's *Director* now, yeah?"

"You haven't changed, Bikou... Did you put him to sleep?" I asked, glancing over at the guard supposed to be keeping an eye on me.

The mischievous monkey broke into a grin. He must have used a sage arts technique or the like.

These guys were skilled infiltrators, no doubt how they had managed to reach the town through the fog barrier. Well, they had to be elusive to have evaded capture for as long as they had.

"So? What did you want?" I asked.

My guests sat down at the table.

"Yeah. It's about evil dragons." And so he started telling me about the one

they had encountered.

...Naturally, I had a question for him.

“Was Azhi Dahaka strong?”

“...Better fun than Pluto, at the very least,” Vali answered while taking a sip from his cup.

...It was probably fair to say Azhi Dahaka was the stronger of the two, then.

“Man, that crazy dragon is *strong*,” Bikou continued. “Stronger than any of the others we’ve fought, that’s for sure! There ain’t nothing more annoying than fighting something that won’t go down no matter what you throw at it.”

“Grendel put up a considerable fight as well,” Arthur noted.

These guys had traveled the world seeking out superpowerful opponents, so when they said someone was strong, they meant it.

“Our demons had a hard time of it, too...,” I answered. “They’ve had some pretty exceptional growth lately, so for them to struggle... Well, it’s a dire situation.”

Vali raised a quizzical eyebrow. “So these evil dragons are the Holy Grail’s work? That thing can manipulate people’s life forces, can’t it? I’m guessing it can revive the dead?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? This did seem like the sort of thing the Holy Grail was capable of.

The Holy Grail...a Longinus capable of disrupting the laws of life itself.

Yes, it was safe to say this was what had the Carmilla’s leaders in a frenzy.

“The state and whereabouts of the soul after death vary according to the mythological system in question...but bringing someone back to life as if nothing happened is next to impossible.”

Even Issei, who’d undergone a miraculous resurrection, had come back with a new body after the destruction of his original one.

Once a soul had passed on, bringing it back to the physical world was no simple task. It was a sacred occasion, when one’s soul left their body after

meeting their destiny.

Unless, of course, you had the ability and power to conquer fate—then it was a different story.

There was also the possibility of resurrection through the demon or angel systems, but in both cases, it would work only if the individual in question was freshly deceased.

“...Are evil dragons an exception?” Vali asked, squinting.

...He was a sharp one; that was for sure.

“...Even Vritra, with both his body and soul torn to shreds, was able to come back simply by bringing those Sacred Gears together,” I said while piling sugar cubes on top of each other. “Based on that, you could probably infer this Longinus is one of the biggest bugs left behind by the Biblical God...”

“And when an irregular Balance Breaker is involved, it ups the ante to a whole new dimension,” Vali remarked.

I nodded in wordless agreement.

Bikou rested his cheek against his hand. “So you’re saying these vampires with the Holy Grail have thrown in with the Khaos Brigade?”

I wouldn’t have been surprised if the Carmilla had prior knowledge about the Tsepesh’s actions. They probably thought our Gasper was the best choice to stop Valerie Tsepesh, the Holy Grail’s current vessel, given his previous relationship with her.

Put another way, one might say Valerie was a particularly problematic issue for these vampires.

The fact that the Carmilla had agreed to enter into negotiations with us was probably proof that they were unable to handle Valerie and the Khaos Brigade alone.

So, had they been forced to surrender their pride, or were they just trying to use us to their own ends so they could snatch the spoils for themselves?

I didn’t know what to make of the situation... Gasper? That girl you think you’re indebted to is caught up in something bigger than any one of us...

With all the commotion in the Carmilla clan, there seemed to be changes in the Tsepesh one as well.

...To be honest, I was worried about Rias. Maybe it was time to call in Issei and the others...?

...Only then did I realize something.

Kuroka and Le Fay weren't here.

"Hey, Vali. What's up with your bad cat and that little witch?" I asked.

"They're staying at Issei Hyoudou's place," he answered with a shrug.

Oh-ho. I see, I see.

"Did they dump you? Lemme guess, you didn't pay 'em enough attention so your rival snapped 'em up?"

My joke seemed to fly right over his head, as Vali answered simply, "Maybe."

...He didn't seem to care at all. Really, it was truly remarkable how little interest he showed toward women. He had been this way ever since he was a kid. Romance meant nothing to him.

...It wasn't as if he hated women. If he did, he wouldn't have let Kuroka and Le Fay join his band.

You might even say my concerns about him were the opposite of those I had for Issei.

"It's all good, Governor." Bikou laughed. "If anything happens to Kuroka or Le Fay, we'll come running. Besides, they're having a bit of fun with the Red Dragon Emperor. Her big bro here's pretty relieved about it all, to be honest," he said, glancing across at Arthur.

"Indeed," Arthur said, adjusting the angle of his glasses. "I suspect she's much safer with him. I still wish she would return to her normal life, but if she won't go back completely, the Red Dragon Emperor's home, with its unique political status, should offer something close. I'm sure the former governor has taken all that into consideration."

So that was how it was going to be. He was a shrewd one, this swordsman.

Battle maniac that he was, he still had a soft spot for his little sister.

"So long as she's with them, I won't let anyone touch her," I told him. "But you had better keep up appearances with Issei and the others, got that? It would be a headache for everyone involved if people found out they were working with you guys."

"Of course." Arthur nodded in agreement.

Well, Kuroka and Le Fay were already half living there... Seriously, how many potential lovers did Issei need? Not that he was consciously seducing them, mind you...

Just how many women would he end up with? Maybe I could try placing a bet with Sirzechs.

A moment later, Bikou reached into his bag to retrieve something—several cups of instant noodles.

Then, before I knew it, he had prepared a pot of hot water.

"Whattaya think, Governor?" he asked as he started getting ready. "The red one? Or the green one? Or this jumbo-sized yakisoba?"

He had quite the selection there, all made in Japan. Well, Japanese instant noodles *were* the most delicious.

"Gimme the green one. I love soba noodles."

I *was* getting a bit peckish, so I figured I might as well keep him company.

"It's like you've gone native in Japan, eh?" Bikou laughed. "Can't blame you... So, Vali, Arthur? Which do you want?"

Both choose cups seemingly at random.

"So the White Dragon Emperor's retinue lives off instant noodles?" I asked. "Don't any of you know how to cook a proper meal?"

"That was Le Fay's job," Bikou said with a wave of his hand. "Without her, it's always instant food. But hey, I'm a fan of noodles, and Vali and Arthur ain't too picky when it comes to eating."

An indescribable feeling washed over me as Vali ripped open a bag of

flavoring. Arthur, true to himself, remarked, “If the tea is good, I have no complaints,” and pulled out his own teapot.

As for Fenrir... No sooner had a cup of instant noodles been placed in front of him than he exuded an unbelievably monstrous aura. He may have been shrunken down from his original gigantic size, but he was still a legendary beast...who loved instant noodles?!

...If this scene was the only thing to go by, the Red Dragon Emperor, who got to eat three meals a day cooked by his beloved wife and mistresses, had it infinitely better!

These guys didn’t have so much as an iota of caution about them. I mean, they were trespassing in vampire territory here. And did they even realize they were wanted fugitives?

No, they probably didn’t. They were idiots through and through.

Vali’s quest to seek out strong opponents had reached obsessive levels. I never would have thought it would extend to long-dead monsters... Was my influence on him too strong? As the one who’d raised him, I was conflicted.

Come to think of it, these guys chose a counselor for Albion based entirely on an introduction from the original Sun Wukong. I only heard about it after the fact, but seriously...

Life.5

A Wolf's Banquet

I'm a god-devouring wolf—the name's Fenrir.

There we were, about to find ourselves in a sticky situation—all because our comrades had been knocked out of battle from the very beginning by the enemies who had challenged us.

"Ha-ha-ha! You're pathetic for a Sun Wukong! Right, Brother?"

"Hee-hee-hee! You said it! I can't believe we got another one, Brother!"

Two humanoid specters clad in ancient Chinese armor let out eerie laughs.

Two of our companions had already been taken captive—an utterly deplorable turn of events.

"What should we do, Li'l Fenrir?" my trusted ally Le Fay asked in consternation.

How did it all come to this?

Allow me to backtrack a little so I can explain.

Among our group's primary goals was to seek out formidable opponents and unexplained phenomena to challenge in battle.

That day, we found ourselves deep in the mountains of China, far from any human settlements.

The landscape, a mist-covered valley with the occasional stone pillar, conjured up a unique atmosphere, the kind you might expect to find a sage or hermit living in. It was a breathtaking view, no doubt one unique to this country.

And beyond it was that which we had come all this way to seek.

"Ugh, it's nothing but mountains, *meow*. And all this fog. Hey, I know—why

don't we all catch a ride on Bikou's cloud and fly over there?"

Voicing her discontent was the nekomata Kuroka, who had black hair and was wearing a kimono of the same color.

She had multiple skills at her disposal, excelling in sage arts, her demonic powers, and spirit sorcery. She had been reincarnated as a demon, only to kill her master and flee the underworld, wandering aimlessly until finding refuge with our group.

I had mixed opinions regarding this nekomata.

She had skill, I would grant her that. But she was vulgar, hedonistic, and always short-sighted in her conduct.

In my mind, she was at the bottom of our group's hierarchy. I couldn't possibly consider her an equal, let alone someone worthy of looking up to.

My instincts had long since established a hierarchical structure for our group, and my pride as a wolf prevailed over my rational intellect on all matters relating to it.

It just went to show that despite my high intelligence and my unique origins, when all was said and done, I was still a beast. Yet I had no complaints. I accepted this as my way of life.

In response to the cat's complaints, the dim-witted monkey breathed a long sigh. "Put a sock in it, wouldja? The boss said we've gotta walk, so that's what we're doing. Plus, this fog—who knows what kinda mystics or something put this up? If we go pulling any fancy tricks, we could get caught by some sage before we know what's on us."

At first glance, Bikou, in his ancient Chinese armor, came across as a human male—but in actual fact, he was a spirit descended from the famous Sun Wukong. Not that he came across as much.

He always wore that silly grin on his face, and he let himself get carried away by his infatuation with worldly culture. His diet and lifestyle were reproachful, utterly devoid of refinement. I hated the thought that I might be mistaken for a companion of his.

Naturally, he was at the very bottom of our hierarchy—lower even than the cat. I couldn't possibly regard him as an equal. The mere thought of being associated with him disgusted me.

“It’s nice to take a leisurely stroll through beautiful surroundings at times, wouldn’t you say?”

This man with the gentlemanly demeanor was Arthur Pendragon, a descendant of the legendary King Arthur and wielder of the Holy King Sword Collbrande. He was extremely out of place, dressed in a suit and glasses in this remote mountainous terrain.

He was always calm and composed, though he didn’t give off a whiff of the aura of the original King Arthur... That being said, his defenses left no openings. Whenever I was in his presence, I couldn’t help but be wary of the *absence* that dwelled within him.

He was indifferent to anything outside his interests. When it came to combat, however, he possessed unparalleled ruthlessness and precision, and he could handle any situation unfazed. He made for an uncanny partner, but it was reassuring to have him around.

He was a dignified, capable companion, and I had a rather high opinion of him.

“Everyone! Wait for mee...”

Trailing behind us was the young girl who dabbled in magic, Le Fay, in her pointed witch’s hat and cloak.

She was the aforementioned Arthur’s younger sister. Being siblings, they bore a strong resemblance—but only appearance-wise. In terms of personality, they were stark opposites. She had none of her brother’s coldness and was the gentlest and kindest in the group.

This girl wasn’t like the others—she was practically devoid of malice. She was, however, inscrutable to all, her brother included. That being said, she wasn’t about to do anything wicked.

And of course, the stew of meat and vegetables she cooked exclusively for me was exquisite, one of my greatest pleasures being part of this group.

For those reasons, I regarded her as a staunch ally. I was often entrusted with her protection, and I could confidently say that, among all our members, she was the one I spent the most time with.

...But as the monkey and the cat said, the atmosphere in this valley was indeed unsettling, dulling my senses. A lukewarm air hung over us, all but sticking to our bodies. I suspected we had ventured into someone's territory.

The air was almost unnaturally devoid of any scents. Yet I had the palpable impression that someone was watching us...or if not watching directly, monitoring us somehow.

My ability to discern other presences nearby had been dulled... The same must have gone for the others, too, as they braced themselves for the worst.

Under normal circumstances, we would never have been so foolish as to venture into a potential trap like this. After all, we were already being hunted by several different forces.

After our recent breakup with the hero faction, our former allies in the Khaos Brigade had marked us for death. Fortunately, our group was skilled in the art of concealment.

Yet circumstances had led us to set foot in this region.

“I don’t mind the feel of this valley.”

Behind these fearless words was a young man, his silver hair streaked with dark as he appeared soundlessly behind me.

“An attack could come from any angle in these mountains. Not bad. There’s a unique dampness in the mist... We’ve set foot in someone’s territory. I can’t get enough of this ambiance, of this mist. Let’s enjoy it while we’re here.”

This was from Vali, the last figure I introduced—simultaneously an immensely powerful young man who had inherited the blood of the true demon king Lucifer, and at the same time the White Dragon Emperor, one of the Two Heavenly Dragons.

The aura raging around his body and the weight of the pressure emanating from him set him apart even within this group of monsters and demons. The

fire in his eyes, always lusting after battle, came alive again as he took in his surroundings.

Vali was the one who had freed my consciousness from the shackles of my father, the evil Norse god Loki. I was my father's fangs and claws, possessed of powers that could inflict grievous wounds even on the likes of gods.

And I was his obedient child—no, I was his servant, no more, no less, following his every order, rending and biting his foes. To think that had been the sole reason for my existence.

It was Vali, wielding the demon chain Gleipnir and the holy sword of dominion, who had changed all that.

What he wanted in exchange was for us to work together—he sought my fangs and claws as deterrents and bargaining chips for use in the battles he sought against gods and deities.

I placed a certain amount of trust in him as the leader of our group. At the very least, he was the only one capable of leading this ragtag assortment of preening cats and vulgar monkeys.

I had left my father, Loki, to join these people...

Because of them, I had been shrunk down and lost much of my strength... And yet...

Mistress Le Fay reached out to pat my head.

"I won't be able to summon Goggy with all this fog," she murmured, eyes dead ahead.

Indeed. There was one more member in our group.

Gogmagog. He was an ancient weapon—a gigantic golem. Because of his massive size, he was unable to accompany us everywhere and was usually stored in a dedicated subspace fold shared by our members. When needed, he could be summoned by Vali, Mistress Le Fay, or even the cat.

He often accompanied Mistress Le Fay to protect her on missions and the like... The same went for me as well.

The monkey walked on ahead, stooped over and breathing heavily. "I don't

know what we're doing here. Who's it meant to be this time...?"

The cat struck him over the head. "Quit whining, *meow*. Isn't this your homeland? *You're* the one who ought to be living in this weird valley."

"I've only heard about it from the old man. It's not like I've ever been here or seen it for myself, you know?"

As the monkey said, we had recently met with the first Sun Wukong seeking answers to several questions.

Among them, he had introduced us to a certain individual—which was what brought us on our current excursion.

"We're nearly there, Albion. How are you feeling?" Vali muttered to himself.

The next moment, an invisible being spoke directly to our minds: "...*Hmm. I don't like the flow of this fog's energy, but it shouldn't pose an issue.*"

The voice belonged to the Heavenly Dragon residing within Vali—the White Dragon Emperor Albion. From time to time, he spoke out loud so we all could hear. More often than not, though, he spoke solely to Vali through his consciousness, the two engaging in private dialogue.

"The counselor the old Sun Wukong recommended should be somewhere in this mist," Vali said, staring deep into the fog.

Yes, that was purpose of our visit—to seek counseling for Albion.

Long ago, the White Dragon Emperor Albion would engage in fierce battles with the Red Dragon Emperor Ddraig at a moment's notice, incurring the wrath of gods and demons the world over. They were permitted to rampage only because they were the most powerful of dragons, capable of keeping other supernatural beings at bay. In the end, however, the three great powers forged a temporary alliance, ultimately sealing the two dragons away in Sacred Gears and the like...

Albion's voice was fragile, his once-commanding tones having lost their vigor.

Why? Because of his rival, the Red Dragon Emperor.

In the present age, Albion and Vali's destined counterpart was beyond the pale—a man constantly lusting after women's flesh. The depths to which this

perverted soul had tarnished the proud and noble heart of the White Dragon Emperor was beyond estimation.

If my fated archnemesis had turned out to be a depraved beast fixated solely on women's breasts and buttocks... The mere thought of it left me engulfed in anger and sorrow. Even I, not a party to their relationship, felt aggrieved—I could only imagine how disturbed Albion himself must have been.

When I learned after the fact that beams of light radiating from the breasts of the high-class demon girl Rias Gremory had restored the Red Dragon Emperor's depleted aura, I must admit I doubted my ears.

Albion, witnessing the spectacle firsthand, was so shocked that he lost his capacity for speech—his mind thrown so far off-balance that it took Vali considerable time to don his Heavenly Dragon armor. In all my years, I had never once heard of a dragon being rendered unable to speak.

Could it be that the Red Dragon Emperor's lewd acts had seriously disturbed Albion's mental state, resulting in Vali falling behind Cao Cao in the heat of battle? The cat and the monkey joked that it was... And I couldn't help but think there might be a hint of truth to that suggestion... Was I overthinking this?

While I was preoccupied with this dilemma, the cat, wearing a bored look, picked a fight with the monkey.

"It's because of your useless sage arts that we've got to wander around in this fog, isn't it?" she said.

"What gives, blaming me for this while you leave your techniques up there on the shelf? Can't you use those massive knockers of yours to shine a beam like that Switch Princess and light up a path for us?!"

"Excuse me?! Don't you dare compare my lovely breasts to those weird batteries of hers, *meow!*"

The two simpletons, cat and monkey, escalated their argument to a stare-down... As they always did. Every time something happened involving these two, it would descend into a pointless argument and disturb the overall atmosphere.

"...B-breasts... Hah-hah... Is Rias Gremory close...?"

"Chill out, Albion. She isn't here. Are her knockers the only thing on your mind? There's a shiver in your voice, you know?" the monkey retorted.

Overhearing their exchange, Albion began to hyperventilate. Even the usually composed Vali seemed unusually stern at his partner's odd behavior.

Albion's symptoms, if one had to guess, were indeed serious. It would be in his best interests to see the counselor as soon as possible.

...

...All of a sudden, I felt a presence appear up ahead. Far from the uncertain, unsettling sensation that had assailed us for some time now, this one was distinct, definite. We must all have noticed it, as all eyes, my own included, were fixed dead ahead on a single point.

From amid the thick fog, a figure gradually took form—an elderly man dressed in the robes of a Taoist monk.

"You're the ones?" he asked with a gentle look. "The Victorious Fighting Buddha—Sun Wukong—told me what happened."

The counselor, it seemed, had found us first.

-○●○-

The monk led us to a simple stone hut, plainly fitted only with the bare minimum of daily necessities.

The household utensils were old-fashioned, mostly made from wood and bamboo. The only ironware to be found were things like scissors and tea kettles.

"This way."

The monk led us into a room in the back with an examination chair. Vali seated himself in front of the monk, while I sat down in a corner, Mistress Le Fay quietly following beside me.

I directed my gaze to the middle-aged monk... He was a quiet fellow, with a calm demeanor and a relaxed, peaceful air about him.

"Shall we begin? Let me see your back. Is the Heavenly Dragon in there?"

The monk held out his palms to Vali's back, where his Sacred Gear wings of

light manifested.

"Please proceed, Buddha of Candana Merit," Vali said.

The monk broke into a grin. "Oh, you needn't address me so formally."

"...How about Tripitaka Master Xuanzang, then?" Vali asked again.

Once more, the monk—this Tripitaka Master Xuanzang—shook his head. "Oh-ho-ho. There's no need for the lofty titles. Just Xuanzang will do," the Tripitaka master said with a gentle look.

Or rather, the *former* Tripitaka master.

Yes, this was the Buddhist monk who appeared in the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, the one who traveled to India with the first Sun Wukong and the Jade Dragon Yulong, one of the Five Great Dragon Kings, seeking Buddhist sutras.

After successfully retrieving the sacred texts and performing a range of daring feats, he achieved Buddhahood himself. Now he lived in seclusion in this remote mystical mountain area shrouded in eerie fog...

The first Sun Wukong had introduced him as a potential counselor to treat Albion's condition.

"A Heavenly Dragon with a troubled mind... Ah, I see you have a staunch companion. Very well, I will hear you out with an open heart."

The Red Dragon Emperor Ddraig was said to be receiving counseling somewhere else. Albion had asked to see a different counselor, and this was the result.

"Let us speak, then, Vanishing Dragon."

"...Thank you for seeing me."

"I will also ask for your thoughts on his mental state, young man, seeing as you are the host."

"Of course."

Thus began this strange counseling session between the Tripitaka Master Xuanzang and the White Dragon Emperor.

First, Albion began by describing the reasons he hadn't been feeling well lately, explaining in no uncertain terms the situation in which his nemesis found himself, and the shock and sorrow that discovery had plunged him into.

The scene was hard to describe, truly an unimaginable sight. Here we had a proud Heavenly Dragon expounding on his emotional distress. One of the strongest creatures on earth, a raw manifestation of power and pride, this dragon laid his heart bare... What else can I say?

Xuanzang listened quietly, nodding to Albion's words. "I see. It appears your lifelong enemy has become infatuated with the female breast, and the situation only worsens with each passing day. And you find it lamentable and heartbreaking to witness his decline..."

"...If that was all, I could ignore the Red and put up with it. But his influence has started affecting me... Th-the chief Norse god... H-he called me the Ass Dragon Emperor... Ugh... Nggghhh..."

...What a wretched thing to watch, a legendary dragon, the White Dragon Emperor, brought to tears.

Vali, the host of the White Dragon Emperor, fell silent and closed his eyes. No doubt he was struggling to figure out what to say.

To be honest, my own thoughts were also in disarray... The cat and the monkey, reacting as lowly as ever, were holding their hands over their mouths to suppress their laughter.

"When you live a lifespan approaching perpetuity, it is natural to feel uncertain when facing a new experience for the first time," Xuanzang responded carefully. "It would not be advisable to ignore your archenemy, the Red Dragon Emperor. He, too, suffers in a similar way as you, making you kindred spirits."

"He's suffering, too...? Kindred...spirits...?"

"Indeed. Judging from what I've heard, it sounds like he carries an even greater burden—perhaps more than you can imagine. It seems he might be the only one who can truly understand and share your sorrow. It would be wise to try discussing your predicament with him."

“...Talk to Ddraig...? Discuss this pain with him...? I hadn’t thought of that. You’re right, though, we are the same. I resented him for the damage he inflicted on me. But was I mistaken...? He, too, is a victim of the current Red Dragon Emperor...”

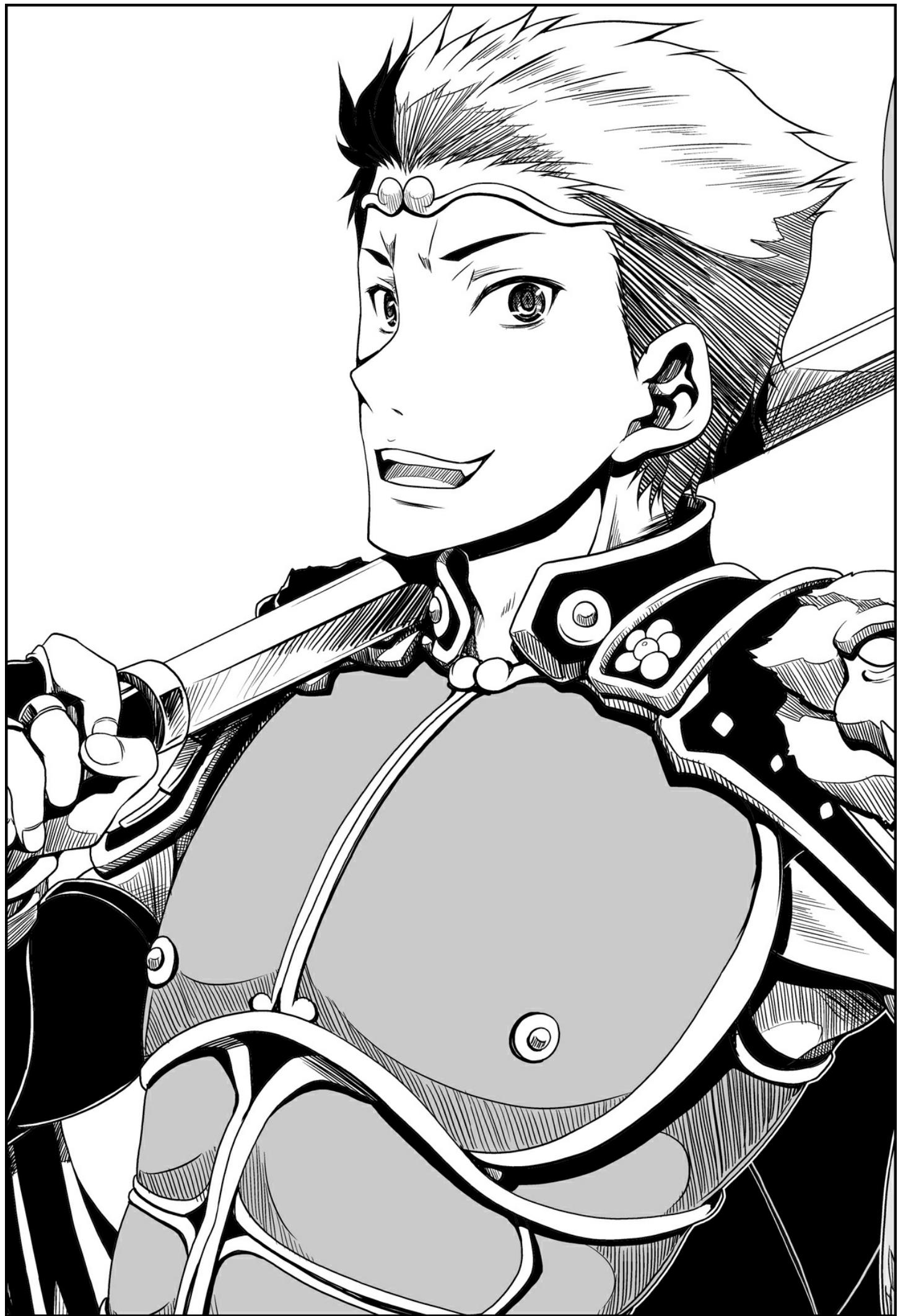
I could hear the strength returning to Albion’s voice. His conversation with the Tripitaka master had clearly had an impact. This may sound strange coming from me, a nonhuman creature myself, but I found it difficult to grasp the mental structure of dragons. They were endlessly proud, possessed of an arrogance that refused to bend to the will of others—yet at the same time, they could be so sensitive and delicate.

...My comrade, the Sleeping Dragon Midgarsormr, was likewise an enigma. He was considered a dragon king, yet he took no pride in that fact, merely indulging in idleness and sloth. No doubt he continued to await the apocalypse at the bottom of the sea.

Vali let out a long exhale. “Master Xuanzang, I’d like to ask you something while we’re here. The residual thoughts of previous generations of White Dragon Emperors lingering in my Sacred Gear are clamoring to set up a Red Dragon Emperor Victims’ Association to break past this deadlock and help Albion... What should I do?”

A Red Dragon Emperor Victims’ Association... To think that such a thing had been born inside his Sacred Gear... Yes, the relationship between these two Heavenly Dragons was indeed a complex one.

“...Bah! Hear that, Kuroka? A Red Dragon Emperor Victims’ Association!”



“Oh, that’s hilarious, *meow...*! What Vali and the Red Dragon Emperor have is less like a rivalry and more like a joke gold mine!”

Unable to contain their mirth, the monkey and the cat burst out in laughter... They were enjoying themselves so much that I wanted to throw them both out of the monk’s hut.

Even Xuanzang seemed puzzled by Vali’s question. “Oh? Must you go so far? Regardless, today I shall listen to your side of the story.”

In the end, the Tripitaka master’s counseling session continued for an additional two hours.

“I will prepare some medicine for you. Please wait here.”

Once the main consultation was over, Xuanzang brought several bottles of medicines and dried herbs down from the shelves and began mixing them.

The way the Tripitaka master spoke was remarkable. Cheerfully dealing with a dragon—and not just any dragon, but a Heavenly Dragon—and taking the nature of his kind into careful consideration.

From beginning to end, Albion shared his concerns, and the monk listened without interruption. Vali was so relieved that he left the two to their own devices.

After around thirty minutes, Xuanzang finished concocting his medicine and handed the bag with the finished mixture to Vali before proceeding to explain how to use it.

“Dissolve the brown powder in water and then apply it to the part of the body where the Sacred Gear manifests—that is, to your back. That should suffice. The brown leaves should be infused with tea and ingested. They will have a soothing and calming effect on the mind.”

“Am I supposed to drink that?”

“Indeed. Return when the medicine runs out.”

The three of them spoke for a few more minutes when Vali said, “I’d like to schedule regular sessions for Albion, but with the fog, I’m not sure if we can always make it in time for his appointments.”

He had a good point. I, for one, didn't want to end up walking for several hours lost in the fog.

"This is a liminal space between the ordinary world and a hidden village inhabited by the supernatural," Xuanzang explained. "The mist that drifts through this area is to prevent immature and malevolent sage creatures from causing mischief in the human world. Merely coming into contact with it is enough to influence the minds of weak creatures. The fact that you are able to move within it is evidence of your considerable skills. I shall guide you along a path that is less likely to be detected by other beings. Please pass through there next time."

So it was an enchanted fog? No wonder our powers couldn't pierce it properly.

I had no idea the world of supernatural sages existed beyond the mist... I had heard stories of such places nestled deep in the mountains, but it never would have occurred to me that this was one of them. For our group, always seeking out powerful foes, we could have asked for nothing more. I could sense, in fact, a surge of fighting spirit among each of our members.

"Aren't you from here? You ought to know all this, *meow*," the cat needled the monkey.

The monkey rubbed his head, flashing her a sly grin. "Lemme tell you, there are all sorts of supernatural hideouts in this country. My hometown didn't have any fog like this. In our village, everyone's all peaceful. I was the only troublemaker around. The spirit sages around here are probably a bit more on the rough side."

Xuanzang let out a light chuckle at Bikou's reaction. "You're just like your forefather. Especially your face when you laugh. It's nearly identical."

"F-for real, Master Sage?!" the monkey blurted out. "You're saying I'm gonna end up like that old bastard...?!"

Most would have considered the comparison a point of honor. Was he really so stupid as to take a blow from Master Xuanzang's praise? He would have done well to accept the compliment with grace.

At that moment, the cat's ears perked up—and Arthur, until now watching in silence, turned to the entrance with a wide grin.

...I felt it, too—two suspicious presences approaching the hut from outside.

We all noticed it, everyone standing up alert.

The next instant, the figures outside called out to shatter the silence.

"Hello there!"

"Hello there!"

Two male voices, both calling out to the owner of the hut.

Xuanzang seemed to recognize them, chuckling under his breath.

We followed the monk through the door, leaving the cabin behind us. There, we found two humanoid specters clothed in ancient Chinese warrior armor. Both had the same face and figure, horns growing from their heads, sharp claws protruding from their hands, bulging eyes, and mouths with exposed fangs. In height, they were near enough to that of the average human male.

One's armor was engraved with the Chinese character for *gold*, while the other was marked with the one for *silver*.

The two adopted grandiose poses.

"I am the Golden Horned King!"

"I am the Silver Horned King!"

They stood there triumphantly, all but assured we would recognize them.

As he looked them over, Vali's lips twisted in a grin.

The monkey rested a hand on his forehead in surprise. "...Seriously? Meeting these guys way out here...? The damn horned kings...?!"

These two specters—the Golden Horned King and the Silver Horned King—were brothers who appeared in *Journey to the West*. In all likelihood, they were the real thing. Their auras were strong—so much so that even their silly poses were devoid of openings that an opponent might hope to exploit.

Xuanzang smiled in recognition, acting as if a pair of mischievous kids had just

paid him a visit. Judging from his reaction, this wasn't the first time they had dropped by.

"Ah, I see the Golden Horned King and the Silver Horned King have graced us with their presence. Are you two here to while away the time with us today?" he asked with a knowing smile.

The two horned kings flashed him confident grins.

"Ha-ha-ha! You won't be taking that tone with us after today, Xuanzang!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Your peaceful days are at an end, Xuanzang!"

The two of them adopted battle stances, ready to face off against the Tripitaka master.

The monkey positioned himself in front of Xuanzang, facing the two horned kings. "Geez, I can't believe we've gotta deal with these guys... What's the move, Vali? Are we doing this?"

Goldenhorn and Silverhorn, however, wore puzzled looks at Bikou's sudden appearance.

"You—did the Great Sage Equal to Heaven send you?"

"No, Brother. He possesses the *qi* aura of the Great Sage Equal to Heaven himself!"

The two believed they had ascertained his true identity. Bikou and his forebear did indeed share the same aura, and since they had met the original Sun Wukong in the past, this was a natural reaction.

"Eh, I've got nothing to hide. Just so you know, I *am* descended from Sun Wukong."

Just before, the monkey had been in a state of shock at being compared to his forebear. Now, he boldly asserted as much himself. Yes, he was an overconfident one...as to be expected from the lowest of the low.

Vali stepped forward to address the two specters. "Perfect. Golden Horned King, Silver Horned King, let me ask you something."

No doubt sensing the White Dragon Emperor's aura, Goldenhorn and

Silverhorn exchanged stern glances.

“Mwah! Brother. This dragon has unusual *qi*!”

“Hmm. Brother. This dragon has an extraordinary aura!”

It seemed they recognized Vali’s power even without having to resort to combat. They had clearly earned their reputations as legendary monsters recorded in the annals of history.

“I’m looking for the mountain where Prince Nezha is said to appear,” Vali asked, unconcerned. “If you know where it is, tell me.”

Yes, Prince Nezha—a powerful deity we were pursuing, from *Journey to the West* and *The Investiture of the Gods*. He was said to be a conqueror and a hero of countless battles, a master of a great many divine weapons.

In terms of simple combat power, he was said to be on par with the first Sun Wukong—or perhaps even stronger. Our information suggested that he sometimes came down from Mount Sumeru to one of these deep, secluded mountains.

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“Hee-hee-hee!”

The two specters looked at one another, exchanging wry grins. Judging from that reaction, they did indeed know something, though they weren’t about to tell us...

Incensed by their mocking laughter, Bikou manifested his Power Pole. “We’ll just have to beat it out of you, then!”

As ever, the monkey sought to resolve this through brute force. Typical.

“...Okay if we take care of these two, Master Sage?” Bikou asked.

“Go ahead,” Xuanzang answered. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea for them to witness the powers of Sun Wukong once more.”

Surprisingly, he turned out to be very accommodating. He was far too tolerant, if you asked me. It was hard to imagine he used to tighten a hoop around the first Sun Wukong’s head every time he misbehaved. Had becoming

a Buddha softened him?

“Oh-ho. Bikou? How about I lend you a hand, *meow?*” Kuroka said, positioning herself next to the monkey.

“Eh? Back off, Kuroka. I can handle them on my own. Besides, you can’t even use your sage arts in this mist, let alone your magic. Right? And you ain’t cut out for hand-to-hand combat like your sister.”

“Oh-ho. Don’t worry. If push comes to shove, I’ll slap them with a cat punch, *meow!*”

Even faced with famous creatures from the Four Chinese Masterworks, the monkey and the cat were raring for a fight...

The two specters’ sneers only deepened as they pointed at Bikou and Kuroka.

“So this one is Bikou...? And that one is Kuroka?”

They were confirming their names...? Hold on, if memory served me right—

“Eh? So?”

“*Meow?* You’ve heard of me?”

Both monkey and cat remained unfazed.

The next moment, Silverhorn pulled a gourd from his waist—and as he did so, a strange vortex rose out from its drinking spout, sucking the cat and the monkey in with tremendous force.

“Waaa! Uh-oh!”

“*Meow!* He’s got *that* gourd?!?”

The two had left themselves wide open and, as a result, found themselves plunging straight into the gourd with no way to resist.

...It happened so quickly that the rest of us could only watch, dumbfounded.

...What utter simpletons they were, the both of them.

According to legend, the Golden Horned King and the Silver Horned King possessed five treasures bestowed on them by the Supreme Venerable Sovereign. The most famous was this red gourd, a calabash capable of sucking

in anything that responded by name. Even I, hailing from Norse mythology, knew that much—yet the cat and the monkey stormed ahead without so much as a shred of caution... If their heads had been screwed on right, they should have been more than capable of fighting back, but alas.

Truly, they were fools, the both of them.

And so, we find ourselves back where this all began... Now that those two simpletons had been sucked into the gourd, how were the rest of us to deal with the two horned kings?

The logical course of action would have been to wait for directions from our leader, Vali, and yet...

Arthur pulled his Holy King Sword Collbrande from its subspace fold, the holy weapon shimmering quietly. Its dense aura remained potent even amid the mist, easily proving its reputation as one of the strongest holy swords.

“How shall we do this, Vali? Is our priority rescuing Bikou and Kuroka? Personally, I’m more worried about one of the other five treasures they possess—the Seven Star Sword,” he said, his gaze falling on a bejeweled sword hanging at Goldenhorn’s waist. The weapon was said to possess the power to destroy evil and to subdue monsters.

“What a pain. Bikou and Kuroka could afford to be more vigilant,” Vali muttered as he powered up a mass of demonic energy and casually hurled it at our two opponents.

He cast it lightly enough, but the attack was thrown by the White Dragon Emperor, one of the strongest entities in the historical record. Any weak foe would have been vaporized immediately. And yet—

Goldenhorn pulled a large leaf-shaped fan from behind his back and brushed the projectile away.

“Palm Leaf Fan!”

The large fan generated a strong gust of wind, dissipating the fog in the immediate vicinity and flinging Vali’s attack far into the distance.

...That was another of their five treasures, the Palm Leaf Fan, a weapon

capable of blowing nearly anyone away. Even Vali seemed taken aback.

“I should have guessed I’d need more than a half-baked attack. You *are* legendary monsters. Especially if you put up a fight against the original Sun Wukong.”

The Golden Horned King and the Silver Horned King accepted his praise, triumphantly crossing their arms and responding with forceful nods.

“Hmm! The dragon understands us better than the cat or Sun Wukong’s blood did, Brother!”

“Hmm! The dragon seems much more capable than they were, Brother! However...!”

Once again, the two struck a grandiose pose.

“*You’re nothing against us Great Horned King Brothers!*” they declared with an abundance of confidence.

Meanwhile, Xuanzang watched on with a tender smile. “Well then, what now? Shall I teach you their weakness?”

Vali shook his head as his brilliant White Dragon Emperor wings burst from his back. “No. Nothing beats going up against strong foes and fighting my own way. I appreciate the offer, but I’ll do this on my own... I won’t cause you any trouble.”

The next moment, he leaped forward, diving into battle against the two horned kings.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Arthur stowed his holy sword back in its subspace void. “Let’s give him this. It might even help rehabilitate him—or Albion, rather. Le Fay, you can observe for today. Keep a close eye on the two monster siblings so we can rescue Bikou and Kuroka when the opportunity shows itself.”

“Understood, Arthur. Hee-hee. Vali looks like he’s having fun. Don’t you think, Li’l Fenrir?”

Indeed, Mistress Le Fay. And so I decided to sit beside her and observe our leader throw himself into combat...

“Let me ask you again. Which mountain does Prince Mezha come down to?”

A short time later, after defeating the Golden Horned King and the Silver Horned King, Vali dispelled his armor and turned his attention back to the two monster brothers, who now found themselves bound by an unyielding rope, one of their own five great treasures.

After exchanging several blows, the horned kings realized just how exceptional the White Dragon Emperor’s powers were and tried to use the rope to snare him. Vali, however, took full advantage of that opportunity and trapped them instead.

Despite their formidable powers, the brothers had fallen victim to the same kind of trivial opening Kuroka and Bikou had.

...Could it be that all specters and *youkai* possessed this weakness, this tendency to carelessly leave themselves open?

“...You’ll find Prince Nezha in the lotus grove three valleys down.”

“...Hmm. The prince—or the lotus, rather.”

Both Goldenhorn and Silverhorn wore their displeasure plain for all to see. Not at all happy with the outcome of the battle, they turned to Vali.

“Like the prince, do you believe in the resurrection of the Bull Demon King?” Goldenhorn asked.

“Like the prince, do you mean to destroy the reborn Bull Demon King?” Silverhorn asked.

The Bull Demon King...a leading Chinese monster famed for clashing in battle against Xuanzang and his companions. As far as I knew, he was supposed to be long dead...

Vali’s lips curled in a dauntless grin. “Now *that* sounds interesting. We’ll look into this lead while chasing down Prince Nezha. The search for Crom Cruach was a waste of time, but this could be more promising.”

Truly, this man delighted in learning of new potential opponents.

Next, Vali shifted his gaze to the Tripitaka master. “We’ll be back when we

run out of medicine. Thank you again for your help, Master Xuanzang.”

For the bold and fearless Vali, this was a carefully worded request.

Or rather, this White Dragon Emperor had the capacity to show his respect when it was warranted.

Xuanzang nodded. “Yes, of course,” he answered with a faint smile. “What a curious day it’s been. You may leave Goldenhorn and Silverhorn to me. Oh-ho. Come along, my horned king friends. You can help me cook dinner tonight.”

The two specters seemed unamused, pursing their lips at this request.

All that remained was...

“Hey! Lemme outta here already!”

“Leader! Let me out, meow!”

A pair of voices sounded from the crimson gourd Mistress Le Fay was holding in one hand. Yes, the monkey and the cat were still alive in there.

“You can stay there for a while,” Vali said with a shrug. “Golden Horned King, Silver Horned King—I’m borrowing this gourd of yours. It should be just the thing to give these two a little training. A reflection cell, you could call it.”

“You mad at us, Vali?! Just ‘cause we got sucked into a gourd, you’re gonna get all bent outta shape?! I let my guard down a bit, that’s all! I’ll win next time!”

“Meow! How can you be so stupid, Leader?! I’m running off to Shirone’s place when I get out of here!”

The two simpletons continued to kick up a fuss from their handheld prison.

“Being on this team really has its moments.”

“It does, doesn’t it, Arthur?”

The Pendragon siblings were enjoying themselves—and I, for one, was more than a little amused.

Life certainly was more interesting with this group than it had been back with my father, Loki. I couldn’t think of a better way to kill time and satisfy my curiosity.

"Let's move on," our White Dragon Emperor said while spinning the gourd containing the monkey and the cat around his finger.

Yes, our journey was far from over.

The world remained full of mysteries and powerful foes alike, all waiting for us to seek them out and discover them.

Episode Azazel.2

I—Azazel—often find myself thinking that Ddraig and Albion ended up with unfortunate hosts this time around. Something told me they never expected to find themselves labeled the Breast Dragon and the Ass Dragon Emperor of all things.

“One day, it will be time for Issei Hyoudou and me to fight in earnest. I hope Albion will have grown used to the Red Dragon Emperor’s circumstances by then.”

So Vali was still fixated on that...

“...*Impossible*,” the dragon answered in a solemn tone.

Bikou, by his side, let out a loud guffaw. “Sounds pretty interesting if you ask me! A showdown between the Breast and Ass Dragons! Hey, Azazel, how ‘bout you get in on this and work on an Ass Dragon project with Vali?”

“Yeah, I’m already looking into that,” I answered.

At this, Albion became audibly distraught. *“Ugh...! You’re saying I won’t even be able to laugh at Ddraig anymore...? No, not that I’ve ever mocked him over this...! So we’re to be brothers in arms, are we? Fine! Next time I see him, we can talk about our joint suffering together...!”*

Albion seemed surprisingly accepting of this proposal.

To think that the Two Heavenly Dragons were going to hit it off over *this...* Hey, could this mean the end of their constant fighting? And all because of Issei’s perversion...?

Vali broke into an unflinching smile, showing not even the slightest concern for the hardships his partner was enduring. “An evil dragon... Interesting. I wonder if we might even bump into Crom Cruach. We weren’t able to locate

him before. Heh. Yes, this is going to be good.”

He was showing his true battle maniac colors again. And after that scuffle deep in the mountains of China...

The next moment, his expression turned suddenly grim. “...Azazel. We heard from someone called Euclid Lucifugus or whatever... He claimed he’s the mastermind behind all this.”

“—?!”

I couldn’t help but be startled by this revelation... So they told Vali and company?

His eyes were burning unusually bright, radiating resentment and hatred. “...It was *him*, Azazel. That bastard was their ringleader...!”

There was only one person who could have prompted this bitter response.

But if it was true, Vali and company probably wouldn’t be his only victims...!

...Why had he decided to take the stage *now* of all times...?

A chill swept through my body as I listened to Vali’s report.

Episode Yuuto.1

It was snowing steadily outside.

Alongside my master, Rias Gremory, I—Yuuto Kiba—had entered the territory of the vampire Tsepesh clan in remote Romania.

This was the Vlad's family stronghold. In the castle, we had been quartered in a living space from which we could see pure white snow coating the town outside the window.

Was it fair to say this was Gasper's hometown?

The buildings had been shrouded in fog until late morning, but it dissipated as soon as the snow began to fall.

That made sense. The point of the fog was to block out the sunlight. Once the weather turned snowy, it wasn't necessary anymore.

For my part, I didn't at all like that odd, slimy mist. It was unsettling, leaving me feeling like we were constantly being watched.

Surprisingly, even Azazel, who had left us partway during our journey to visit the Carmilla vampires, had complained about the fog. I suspected the other clan maintained it as well.

On entering the Vlad territory, we were immediately led up to their castle. There, the president successfully made contact with Gasper's father, who granted her permission to stay for a short while after a brief discussion.

No doubt she had more she wanted to investigate. And I suspected the Vladis weren't about to let us leave so easily...

Despite the snow falling outside, I could make out a massive structure in the distance—the fortress of the main Tsepesh line. It was considerably larger in scale than the Vladis' castle.

Pureblooded vampires preferred to establish themselves in the heart of their territories—and as such, this castle town was littered with mansions and castles belonging to noble families. It was probably much the same in the Carmilla territory, I suspected.

It was said that some pureblooded vampires chose to reside deeper in the country, but they were widely regarded as outcasts unable to adapt to modern vampire society...

Maybe there was a chance we would have better luck with them. The nobility these pureblooded vampires prided themselves on wasn't something to be revered by outsiders.

At that moment, there came a knock at the door.

"Yuuto? Can I come in?"

It was the president.

"Of course," I answered, and in she came looking bored.

It was little wonder. After all, her meeting had been called off halfway through.

The castle had *changed* from the other day. You wouldn't have known from its appearance or atmosphere, but I could tell there was something different in the air, about the people who dwelled in it. The current head of the Vlad family, Gasper's father, was at first highly attentive to the president's thoughts and opinions, yet he had suddenly postponed any further meetings in order to leave for the Tsepesh fortress.

The president, however, still wished to talk, and so we found ourselves with considerable time on our hands. The only activity available to her was to pace back and forth between her room and mine. Anything else would risk breaking some taboo or another.

She continued to stare out the window at the world beyond.

"Why don't we try calling Issei?" I suggested.

The president let out a sigh. "It would be during the school day back in Japan, so I shouldn't disturb him. Besides, we haven't accomplished anything yet. I

would just end up making him worry..."

She was probably right. Knowing Issei, if he heard the president was just idling away the hours in the Vladi castle to no effect, he might overreact and assume she was being held captive.

Technically, we *were* effectively under house arrest, but it was best not to make anyone worry unnecessarily.

The president continued to watch the scenery outside. "...This reminds me of that day. It was snowing then, too," she whispered.

Ah. Yes.

"I was thinking the same thing. It all started somewhere not too far from here. Much closer than Japan, at any rate."

Yes, it was on a snowy day like this that I first met the president...

Life.6

Into the Sunlight

...I want to live.

Deep in the snowy forest, I was quietly approaching my end.

The Church had gathered children like me—children from humble backgrounds but possessed of unique abilities—to use as test subjects in a special project hoping to artificially create a fighter capable of wielding the Holy Sword Excalibur.

Day after day, they conducted experiments on us. It was painful, trying, but they told us we had been chosen by God for a special purpose, and so neither I nor my brothers or sisters gave way to fear or doubt.

Until that day it all came crashing down.

Without warning, the Church officials decided to *dispose* of us.

We were ushered into a chamber and doused with gas... My hands went numb, my legs refused to move, and an intense pain coursed through my body as if my every nerve had been torn to shreds.

Tears, blood, all kinds of bodily fluids flooded out, pure, abject suffering taking over my entire being.

Gradually, my consciousness began to fade... I was dying.

I watched as my brothers and sisters died right before my very eyes.

I couldn't understand what was happening. It felt like another of the Church's experiments.

To think that the researchers, the same men and women who told us we were special, who claimed to be serving God, had turned on us like this...

One person died, then another, on and on. Only as my own turn approached

did I finally understand.

Ah. They were killing us.

My turn rolled around, and the researchers, dressed in protective gear, led me and several other terrified children into the center of the room and started spraying us with gas.

We tried to hold our breath, but we couldn't help eventually inhaling small amounts of the toxins.

As soon as we did, our bodies were hit with pain and spasms, our vision starting to blur.

While I knelt on the floor massaging my body in order to ease the pain, one of my brothers resisted, pushing past the researcher.

After forcing the door open, the boy, the least affected among us, called out, "Run! You have to run!"

...I jumped to my feet, fleeing as fast as I could.

I didn't want to die...

With single-minded determination, I took advantage of the researchers' lax attention to escape the facility.

No doubt they never suspected any of us would run away, always telling themselves that we devout believers would follow their instructions no matter what.

Through the smallest of openings, I managed to make my way outside.

"Wait!"

"Don't let him escape!"

The researchers, however, were relentless in their pursuit.

Through the snowy mountain forests I ran, reflecting on my time spent at the research facility...

On my brothers and sisters, all of us vowing to become something special. We ate together, we sang together, we laughed together.

...And now they were all dead. I was the only one who had managed to get away.

...I had to escape, for their sake. Especially after they gave their lives so I could have a chance at life.

I was alive...

Yet excruciating pain continued to tear at my body, and I could feel myself slipping away as a murderous drive for revenge took root inside me...

Those people...

Whoever came up with that stupid scheme...

The Excaliburs...

I wouldn't forgive any of them!

But my strength, both physically and mentally, was at its limit...and I collapsed soundlessly in the middle of the forest.

I couldn't even move my fingertips anymore.

...Death was certain. If I could just move forward, even one step...

I couldn't stand it if everyone died in vain.

I...I...

I just wanted to live...

As my senses left me, a crimson hue entered what little was left of my vision.

I looked up, laying eyes on a crimson-haired girl.

As the world blurred, I saw her smile.

"What is it you desire?" she asked, holding me as I lay there dying.

That was how I met my master, Rias Gremory.

Four long years ago now.

When I woke up—I was in a room somewhere... Was I lying in bed?

The sight of the unfamiliar ceiling left me reeling in confusion.

...I had escaped after being gassed in the lab, and then...

I wandered through the forest. And I met a crimson-haired girl...?

So why...? Why was I *here*, in this room I had never seen before? I hadn't been brought back to the facility, had I?

Amid my confusion, the door swung open, and a small girl strode in carrying a washbasin... Hold on, did she have cat ears sticking up from her head...? Was she a monster?

“...!”

Realizing I had come to, the girl dashed from the room still clutching the washbasin.

“*Oh dear. Are you awake? What a relief. I'll call for Rias,*” sounded another voice from beyond the open door.

I pulled myself out of bed and peeked outside.

...It was a large living room, fitted with tables and everyday furniture.

It wasn't long before I spotted a black-haired girl and the cat-eared one from before.

The black-haired girl was just leaving the room, while the cat-eared one tensed up and hid after sensing my presence.

“...”

I could feel her staring at me in wordless silence.

Before long, the black-haired girl returned with the crimson-haired one. Both looked to be around the same age as me, thirteen or fourteen perhaps.

No sooner had the crimson-haired girl entered than the one with the cat ears hid behind her. They seemed to share a close bond.

“Please don't pick on her,” the crimson-haired girl said with a smile. “Koneko here is very shy. My other friend is called Akeno.”

She proceeded to pat the cat-eared girl behind the ears. Koneko responded with a contented purr.

Yes, that was my first encounter with Koneko. President Rias had just taken her in at the time, and she was naturally wary, still in the middle of her

recovery.

From their otherworldly auras, I grasped at once that these three weren't human.

Their auras...I had felt something similar during the experiments I was subjected to at the facility.

Demons.

I reached for the scissors on the table, holding them angled at the three girls.

"...Where am I? Why am I here?! Who are you?!"

The crimson-haired girl broke into a devilish grin. She wasn't at all angry at my defensive stance.

"This is Japan. You've heard of it? An island nation in East Asia, and one of the most beautiful places in the world. I brought you here because you could pass for Japanese. This is my temporary residence."

Japan? Island? Temporary residence?

None of what she said made any sense. I had collapsed in the middle of a forest in Europe. How could I possibly have woken up in Japan?

Noticing that I was still confused, the crimson-and black-haired girls nodded at each other—and two pairs of bat-like wings emerged from their backs.

Demon wings...

"My name is Rias Gremory," she said with a gentle look that didn't seem at all demonic. "I'm the heir to the House of Gremory, a high-ranking demon family. And you..." She paused there, pointing to my own back.

The next moment, I felt something emerge from my flesh. Glancing over my shoulder, what stared back at me was a pair of jet-black wings.

"You died, you see. So I reincarnated you as a demon."

...It took me several minutes to fully digest what she had said.

It turned out I had died in that forest and was then reborn as a demon in Japan—a revelation that completely shattered every value I held dear.

“...”

“...I’m not going to do anything to you.”

Rias Gremory and I faced each other in the room. I was as alert as could be, bracing myself in case the girls tried anything.

It seemed I was in an apartment in a town somewhere in Japan.

In my hands I clutched a sword I had manifested at a moment’s notice, pointing its tip at the demon, Rias Gremory.

I still had major doubts about my situation. And I was scared.

That was only natural, right? At the research facility, I had been taught that demons were evil beings, enemies of the faithful. Even after being marked for disposal—even after being betrayed by God—that wasn’t an easy lesson to unlearn.

Yet Rias was kind to me, friendly—which only fueled my suspicions.

It wasn’t in a demon’s nature to show kindness. She had to have some ulterior motive.

...She had turned me into a demon for her own ends. Demons were said to possess the power to deceive humans and to reincarnate them against their will. Perhaps she knew I was a test subject at the facility and wished to use me for something.

She probably wanted to extract information on the Church from me.

...But perhaps *I* could use *her* to exact my own revenge. Torn between hatred and suspicion, I entertained an insane thought—that I would be willing to sell my soul to these demons if it meant avenging my fallen comrades.

Giving up, Rias placed the tray of food on the table and left the room.

She probably expected us to eat together. Odd. Why would a demon want to share a meal with her servants...?

I couldn’t bring myself to eat right away. Instead, I cautiously drank the water, taking only small sips.

It would be difficult to escape the apartment. I could sense a strong barrier in

place, allowing us to pass through the front door but preventing me from opening it.

I was effectively locked up here.

Looking back, it was only natural that Rias had taken precautions. After all, if I *did* manage to escape, I would have been treated as a stray demon, a target for elimination.

At the time, however, I went so far as to contemplate using Koneko as a human shield... Guilt tore at me when I considered pointing a blade at that terrified girl.

More than a month passed like that, and I still hadn't opened my heart to the demon girls.

One day, a man stepped into my room without warning.

He was Japanese—or rather, a demon—and dressed in a haori cloak. Rias Gremory stepped inside behind him.

The man broke into the smallest of smiles. "Is this the Knight, milady?"

"Yes... He doesn't seem to have a name."

As Rias Gremory said, I was without a name. I had been assigned a temporary one during my time as a test subject, but I wasn't about to continue using it. That was a part of me that I had left behind. I was no longer their plaything.

I could tell from the man's aura that he was extremely competent. With the utmost caution, I summoned a sword in my hands.

When he observed my movements, the man's smile deepened. "So you can create swords? You must have a Sacred Gear. Your stance...is abysmal, but you seem to possess a natural talent."

The man took one step at a time as he approached, his smile unwavering.

Unable to tell what he was doing, I decided to risk it and dashed forward, swinging my sword at the man.

He countered with a foot swipe, upending my balance. Missing its target, my sword flew out of my hand and stuck in the ceiling overhead.

The man stood over me as I fell flat to the floor. “I’m Souji Okita. Yes, from today, you’ll be training with me.”

...? I couldn’t begin to comprehend what he had just said.

Train? Who? Me? Why?

The man—Souji Okita—turned back to Rias Gremory. “The training would go more smoothly at a quieter venue, milady. If he’s to be your Knight, he needs to hone his swordsmanship... Perhaps you could lend him to me for a while?”

Rias Gremory startled at first on hearing this request, but seeing that I still hadn’t changed my attitude, she gave me a sad look and said, “All right.”

That was how I met Souji Okita, the man who would become my mentor.

“Now then. Starting today, this will be your home, at least for the time being.”

Through a teleportation square, Souji Okita brought me to a small cabin nestled deep in the mountains.

The world before me was virtually untouched, just a cabin surrounded by trees, with no sign of civilization to be found.

Next to the hut stood a training dojo of some sort. Souji Okita and I walked inside.

The floor was immaculate, so clean that even I, with no swordsmanship training to speak of, hesitated to step on it.

Okita brought down two wooden swords hanging on the wall and threw one at me, readying the other once I had caught mine.

“Now. Come at me,” he instructed.

Still suspicious, I asked, “...Why did you bring me here?”

Okita’s lips curled in a smile. “I can tell from your face that regardless of your current circumstances, you harbor intense hatred and a thirst for revenge. It dominates your mind and soul. Am I right?”

He had seen right through me.

“You lack the skill to exact revenge,” Okita continued. “You would be thrown back the instant you tried. So forget about becoming a demon, about Lady Rias

and everything else, and focus on becoming stronger. If you don't, revenge will always be out of reach."

...

At that moment, his voice reached past the doubts lingering in my heart, helping me consolidate my thoughts into a single decisive direction.

Before I knew it, I held the wooden practice sword up high and lashed out.

"Haaah!"

It was a careless, hasty attack, without form or finesse. I didn't even know how to properly hold a sword. But even so, Souji Okita, my master, took each strike head-on.

For the first time since dying in that forest, I felt that whatever it was that had built up inside me was finding release with each strike of my wooden sword.

Lost in a daze, I kept on swinging and slashing...

"Do you see? When it comes to wielding a blade, accurately targeting your opponent's weaknesses is more important than raw physical strength. For that reason, you need to train your skills."

Souji Okita—my master—gave me honest and sincere guidance on how to hold my sword.

It wasn't his own Tennen Rishin style of swordsmanship that he imparted to me. Rather, he helped me to discover my own unique style of fighting.

What I learned from him was the spirit, the mindset, the attitude one needed when engaging in combat. The rest I picked up by myself.

Close to a month passed since my master started giving me his instruction. Strangely enough, I had never contemplated leaving the mountain during that time.

Why? Because I was growing stronger, and not just physically. I had found a source of sustenance, a source of meaning.

Yes. Just as my master had said when he first brought me here, if I didn't get stronger, revenge would always be out of reach.

It may surprise you to hear this, but my master was the first demon I opened up to.

I hadn't once engaged Rias Gremory or her other servants properly, but I found myself talking to Souji Okita.

One day, we were fishing together by the river.

Before I knew it, it had become routine for us to fish and talk in the warm sunlight.

"Do you hate demons?" my master asked me all of a sudden.

"...Demons are the enemies of mankind," I answered, conflicted. "They want to destroy humans... That's what I was told."

Yes, it had been all but drilled into me at the research institute.

"I see." My master chuckled. "From Heaven's perspective—and from the Church's—demons are indeed an enemy force. But that doesn't mean they're all bad."

"...You're saying they're on the side of people...?" I asked.

My master shook his head with a soft smile. "I would say that, to demons, humans are indispensable. Demons have existed since ancient times, entering into contracts and pacts with humans in exchange for payment. Give and take—that's the most important thing you need to know about us. There *are* some who actively deceive humans, but at the same time, some humans try to trick us for their own benefit, too. It goes both ways."

"I know that. They told me demons are evil creatures, always trying to exploit people's weaknesses."

"Evil... I see," he said, narrowing his eyes. "...True evil is much more hopeless, in my view... Though you might not understand that just yet."

"...?"

I certainly didn't grasp what he meant at the time.

After reeling in a fish, he turned back to me with a question: "Well then, young man. Do you really believe demons exist to destroy humankind? Is that

what you think of Lady Rias? Or me?"

Rias Gremory.

She dropped in to visit us in the mountains every now and then. Apparently, she was worried about me. I still harbored doubts about her intentions, and each time, I had refused to see her as much as possible.

No. There *was* a dim feeling deep down in my heart, telling me the crimson-haired girl wasn't a bad demon...

I could detect no malice behind her smile when she looked at me or the cat girl.

"...I don't know."

That was the best answer I could come up with.

My master chuckled, as if he found my childish worries amusing. "Observe and consider. You've been given that choice, at least. And that's a wonderful thing, wouldn't you agree? The world is full of people who haven't been given that much..."

Now, I can understand what my master was saying. At the time, however, my thoughts were riddled with doubt.

Afterward, my master taught me how to enjoy life. Not only fishing, but cooking, handicrafts, card games, spinning tops, and even writing short poems.

He also taught me how to read Japanese characters.

Yes, with the gentlest of hands, he taught me most of what made me the person I am today.

In the warm sunlight, he would set to his latest lesson.

For time spent with a demon, it was the most precious of things.

"...All right."

There was something I went up to the mountains to do every few days—making tombstones for my fallen comrades. Today, I was erecting several more.

Each one was forged from swords of various shapes and abilities, plunged deep into the soil and used as grave markers.

...I couldn't use crosses. Not if my life depended on it.

There were no names, but even in their absence, I knew exactly which grave belonged to whom. As I stood in front of them, my comrades' faces floated up before me as clear as day.

Around another dozen and I would be finished... The reason I said *around* was because I found myself hesitating on whether to add one for myself.

I had died as a human being. Now, I was a demon. Part of me wondered whether I should add a grave for the me who was gone.

The being who stood here now, setting out on the path for revenge, was a demon.

...Then again, I was still me. I hadn't perished. I may have become a demon, but I was still myself. Maybe I *didn't* need a grave.

...My only regret was that I couldn't erect these graves in our hometown.

When I stopped to think it through, this place was probably good enough. Japan was supposedly a peaceful country, and if that was true, they wouldn't be disturbed here.

I prepared to leave after placing flowers on everyone's grave and closing my eyes in contemplation before each one, when—

"Oh-ho. A demon who can make swords. What a catch."

An eerie voice echoed through the mountains. I quickly scanned my surroundings.

...I sensed an unpleasant aura nearby.

First came the sounds of heavy footsteps...then appeared a giant humanoid figure with the head of a tiger. It was huge—a tiger beastman.

He had to be at least five meters tall. And his aura...it was overflowing in demonic energy!

A demon.

To think another one would pop up in such a remote place... And a stray demon, in all likelihood. My master had already told me about demons who left

their Familias, so I didn't have any trouble grasping the true nature of the monster that had appeared before me.

The tiger beastman gripped one of the tombstone swords I had planted in the ground, staring at me with large, inquisitive eyes. His wide-open maw was lined with neat rows of sharp fangs.

"Demon swords? No, more like fake demon swords. They aren't properly made yet... But it's definitely a unique ability."

I forged another sword in my hands, pointing it at the interloper.

"Let go of that," I demanded. "It's a grave marker...!"

"A grave marker?" the beastman repeated with a caustic smile. *"This? Whatever you say... Come with me, kid. I'm betting you'd fetch a good price. You're a stray like me, ain'tcha? I'm not gonna hurt you."*

...Intrigued by my abilities, the beastman sought to use them for his own benefit.

But there was no way I was going to let him take me.

I would become stronger...

Stronger...

...

And when I was, could I take revenge?

At that moment, a question popped into my mind.

Yes. I had started my training after my master warned me that if I wasn't strong, vengeance would forever be beyond me.

So I *had* to get stronger. But why?

The more time I spent with my master...the more I found myself thinking about unnecessary things.

Fishing with him, seeing who could reel in the biggest catch, delighting as my cooking skills improved...

I had to live for my fallen brothers and sisters, and I had vowed vengeance on

the Excaliburs...but I had also started to find new joy in everyday life.

Shaking my head, I braced myself with my sword as I faced the beastman.

“No! I’m not going with you!” I shouted, doing my best to be brave.

The beastman fixed me with an ugly grin. *“Fine. I’ll just have to rough you up a bit till you’re willing to keep quiet.”*

The next moment, the beastman exuded an aura of utmost hostility as he prepared to launch into an attack.

I dashed ahead, zigzagging around my opponent and thrusting my sword into his blind spot!

A direct hit on his flank! Or so I thought, but the beastman vanished in the blink of an eye!

He was *fast*!

The next moment, a violent blow struck me from behind.

Glancing over my shoulder, there he was, leg still raised in the air after delivering a strong kick! A super-fast surprise attack!

The blow knocked the air out of my lungs, but somehow I managed to land safely.

The beastman let out a vulgar laugh. *“You’ve got some good moves, kid. You’re pretty quick for your age. But we ain’t gotta be enemies. I used to be a Knight under my old boss, you know? Not that I could really wield a sword properly. I’m guessing you were a Knight, too, by the looks of you? Don’t seem to have much power, though.”*

...A Knight? Come to think of it, demons were apparently endowed with certain characteristics based on the chess pieces they were given. So mine was a Knight...? Right, the girl, Rias, had mentioned something like that. At the time, I hadn’t given it a lot of thought...

“Hmm. Reincarnated humans are fragile things, huh?”

The beastman unleashed a powerful kick, shattering every last one of the tombstones I had erected.

"Seems to me you're obsessed with these grave markers of yours! But they're just as fragile as you are!"

I scrunched my face up in rage, dashing ahead!

"Damn you!"

My opponent's moves, however, were stronger than mine, countering my every sword swing.

But no matter how many times my attacks were dodged and countered, I kept pulling myself back up and dashing at him again.

For a child with no real combat experience, I was facing an insurmountable obstacle.

I was beaten up, crumbling to the ground again and again. As I fell, I started to question myself.

...I wanted to be stronger. But for whom? For myself? For my comrades? For revenge?

For all of that. But right now—

"So you're finally settling down, are you?"

The beastman tried to catch me as I lay prone on the ground, when—

"Don't you take another step toward him."

A familiar voice sounded through the forest. Turning my head, I found a crimson-haired girl standing there.

It was Rias Gremory. Quickly grasping the situation, she fixed the beastman with a furious glare. "How dare you hurt him. You're a stray, aren't you? And a bold one, wandering into these mountains. Ignorance is a terrible thing." Though faced with a foe several times her own size, Rias Gremory remained unfazed.

The beastman broke into a surprised look. "...Crimson hair. A Gremory, huh? The kid must be one of yours? Now we're talking. If he belongs to a Gremory, he'll fetch an even higher price than I thought."

Rias Gremory's crimson hair flared in anger at these rude remarks. "Price?

You're planning to *sell* a member of my Familia. I don't think so. You've earned yourself a death sentence!"

...Yes, this beastman deserved a thousand deaths.

How dare he...? Insulting the grave markers I'd made... For my fallen comrades...!

Grimacing as acute pain shot through my entire body, I mustered my strength and forced my trembling knees to unbend, rising to my feet to face the beastman head-on. "...Who I am... Selling me or whatever... None of that matters right now..."

I had to get stronger.

Now. I had to beat this damn tiger bastard, no matter what it took.

He had desecrated my comrades' graves...! And most importantly of all—I wasn't about to let it all end here...!

"I'm not going to lose to someone like yoooouu! I—I'm going to survive! Arggghhh!"

Something seemed to burst as I let out that piercing scream. A split second later, an enormous surge of demonic energy welled up from inside me, spiraling out of control. The next moment, swords of every size and shape imaginable erupted from the ground!

Some of them were imbued with unique attributes, such as fire and ice... One and all, they were demon swords.

I plucked one from the ground, writhing in darkest darkness. A fitting weapon for a demon.

A sword for devouring light. I would call it the Holy Eraser.

Clutching my new weapon, I leaped straight for the beastman, pulling up more demon swords along the way and hurling them at my enemy.

A fire-type demon sword flew into him, fierce flames swirling about as it made contact.

"Ngh!"

The tiger beastman lashed out with his fists, while I brought another demon sword down from above.

He tried catching the weapon in his hand, but I responded by generating an ice-type demon sword at the tip of my foot.

My master's words sounded in the back of my mind: *When it comes to wielding a blade, accurately targeting your opponent's weaknesses is more important than raw physical strength.*

No sooner had I pinned him down with the dark-type blade in my hand than I kicked the ice-type demon sword into the beastman's left eye.

"Nggghhh!"

The beastman, with one eye gouged out, roared in debilitating pain.

"...Power isn't everything," I said with an acidic smile. "If you're a Knight or a swordsman, technique is what counts."

Yes, that was what my master taught me. It was okay to be physically weaker than your opponent, so long as you could make up for it with technique and strike when you spotted an opening.

When he heard this, the beastman's expression gave way to unbridled rage. "Damn yooouuu! You're done, kid! You're going down!"

The beastman swung at me, sharp claws extending from either hand.

My strength was spent after that last attack, leaving me no way of dodging his strike.

I braced myself, knowing I was about to receive a fatal blow, when—

"You're a stray too stupid to realize he's entered my territory... You have a lot to learn," sounded a familiar voice.

Whoosh...

The trees rustled all around.

"Sorry we're late."

Out of nowhere, Souji Okita appeared between me and the beastman, flashing me a winning smile.

What about the beastman's attack...? Only then did I see my opponent seemingly frozen in place. After a short pause, he collapsed to the ground, his body separating into four clean-cut pieces.

My master had carved him up the second he arrived, so fast that I hadn't even made out his movements, let alone the drawing of his sword.

I focused on fixing the broken grave markers with my master and Rias Gremory.

"Young man," my master said softly, "I remember you saying that demons are the enemies of humankind, no?"

Right. I had said something like that during one of our fishing trips.

"I once thought that way myself," my master said as he plunged a newly constructed sword into the earth. "When I was first reincarnated, it pained me to learn I had become a demon. It was then that my lord, Sirzechs Lucifer, said this: *'I want you to decide for yourself. All I've done is given you a chance. How you choose to live and spend your time is up to you. All I ask is for you to help me as my servant every once in a while. Your swordsmanship, I believe, will be vital to my purposes... But if you become a threat to humankind, I, as your master, will take responsibility and destroy you. Remember this. There is no race, be it demon, human, angel, or anything else, that deserves to be destroyed merely for what it is.'*"

My master paused for a moment. "It's up to every demon whether they become a threat to humanity. That goes for you and me and Lady Rias here, too. Wouldn't you agree?"

...At the time, I couldn't fully understand what he meant.

And yet...

As she helped fix the broken graves, I found myself beginning to trust the crimson-haired girl.

Once they were all restored, we set off as a group along the mountain path.

While we walked, my master asked Rias Gremory, "By the way, milady, have you decided on a name for him?"

"Yes. I hope he likes it..." She turned her gentle gaze to me, then said, "Yuuto. Kiba. I thought about it a lot, but that was my gut feeling. What do you think?"

I smiled, nodding along at her suggestion. "Yes. I think it's fine."

Seeing my reaction, both my master and Rias Gremory smiled back at me.

Smiles... Right. I should try smiling more, too. Though I didn't know whether I could ever be like these people...?

But I was alive, so I should try my best to smile as much as possible.

Back at the training dojo, bathed in sunlight, I came out with a suggestion to my master and my crimson-haired lady: "Do you want to play spinning tops?"

Demons though we were, we played together in the brilliant sun.

Episode Yuuto.2

The snowy townscape outside my window remained unchanged, but I—Yuuto Kiba—reminisced with my master, Rias Gremory, about another time.

“Koneko took a while to get used to you, didn’t she?” the president asked with a forced smile.

Yes, Koneko didn’t open up to me immediately after I returned to the apartment. Not that I could blame her, seeing as I had given off such an abysmal first impression.

In time, however, we came to treat each other like siblings. I still considered her a cute little sister.

Then there were President Rias and Akeno, both like dependable older sisters.

The president pursed her lips. “I’m still waiting to hear you call me *Sister* or anything like that, but I suppose I need to wait for the right opportunity.”

I was too afraid to say that word out loud. Besides, I would be treading on Issei’s territory if I did...

In any event, I regarded her as my liege lady and as my sister.

I had great respect for my sword master, too. As far as I was concerned, he was the ideal Knight.

All at once, there came a knock at the door.

After a moment, in strode a vampire from the Vlad family. The young man bore a striking resemblance to Gasper. Perhaps he was one of Gasper’s pureblooded older brothers?

The fact that he had come straight here, rather than his family inviting us down to the reception hall, could only mean that something had happened...

Indeed, the youth wore a stern look.

"My apologies for the interruption, Lady Rias Gremory," he began. "I would like to have a word with you, if I might."

"Of course... You're part of the Vladi family?"

The youth nodded.

The situation had definitely changed if the lord of the castle himself couldn't deal with us directly.

"...People say you and your servants defeated the followers of the old demon kings, the evil god Loki, and the descendants of great heroes," the young man continued.

"...Has something happened?" the president asked.

The youth turned his gaze out the window, toward the Tsepesh fortress. "Is it really a gift from the Biblical God? Why have we vampires, denizens of the night, received it then? None of us can understand that. Why give *us* the Holy Grail...?" He paused to take a deep breath, the tension writ large on his face. "Lady Rias Gremory, I'm to take you to see the current head of the Tsepesh clan —Lady Valerie Tsepesh."

"—?!"

The president and I both started.

Valerie Tsepesh was the family head...?!

...Issei, Gasper, everyone? *There was more going on here than any of us had expected.*

AFTERWORD

Long time no see. Ishibumi here.

I tried something crazy this time around—continuing the overall story while interspersing it with short episodes from *Dragon magazine*. Structurally, it was quite a challenge connecting all these short stories together, and I struggled a bit working it all out plot-wise.

Anyway, let's take a look at each one in order.

Magical Girl Ria (Seriously?!)—Chronology: Around Volumes 8 and 9

I wrote this around a time a certain magical girl was rising in popularity. Well, in this case, she was more of a demon king girl...

Mil-tan, Serafall, and Azazel are pretty well suited to this kind of short story, don't you think?

Scarlet and Crimson—Chronology: Before Volume 1

This here is one of this volume's brand-new stories. I had been hoping for a while to write about how Rias and Akeno met, and I decided it was time to finally make it happen. This is one of those things I mentioned in the last afterward that I wanted to get around to doing. It's a dark story...but it amply illustrates how Issei's kindness helped save Akeno.

You can consider Agrippa a historical figure, one who used to serve Rias's father in his Familia.

To the Holy Ground, Ladies!—Chronology: Around Volumes 7 and 8

This Church Trio tale wasn't included in the previous collections. Plenty of readers wrote in asking for it to be featured, though, so we found a way to work it into this collection. What we have here is an episode in their everyday lives.

If you have any other requests for inclusions, write to Fantasia Bunko's

editorial department!

Training Time! (Hell Edition)—Chronology: Around Volumes 10 and 11

Here we focus on the mysterious Grigori and their remaining executives—who we find to be extremely free-spirited. We also see Gasper start considering whether to enhance his abilities, and Akeno and her father wreaking havoc. We even have an illustration of Baraqiel! Akeno’s last story was incredibly dark, so I figured it was time for a different angle!

A Wolf’s Banquet—Chronology: Around Volumes 12 and 13

Now for one about the White Dragon Emperor, focusing on Vali and his friends out on their usual travels, constantly seeking out powerful individuals and mysterious entities and what have you.

We also got to see Albion’s counseling session... What a pitiful state this Heavenly Dragon has been reduced to.

Into the Sunlight—Chronology: Before Volume 1

This is the second original tale this time around, giving us Kiba’s backstory. It’s another of the pieces I’ve been wanting to get around to, showing how he opened up to Rias and first met Souji Okita.

Just like Akeno’s origin story, it’s all about a young soul with a desperate wish to live.

Additional Episodes—Chronology: After Volume 14

We have a few extra episodes linking the others, featuring Issei, Azazel, and Kiba. And we’ve learned the name of the mage organization that we inadvertently missed last time.

At long last, Dulio, Heaven’s Joker, and Tobio Ikuse, Slash Dog, have met Issei and company face-to-face. Tobio Ikuse is the main character in my other work, *SLASHDØG*, but don’t worry if you haven’t read it. This is just a piece of fan service for longtime readers. Both will continue to support Issei and company behind the scenes from here on out.

I realized somewhat late that we’ve got a lot of fog and mist barriers this time around, and a lot of searches going on, too. Pure coincidence, I’m afraid.

Now for some brief acknowledgments. To Miyama-Zero and my editor H, thank you again, as always!

Next time we'll finally be getting around to our vampire arc—and a Gasper episode! Expect plenty of plot development and intensive battles! Rias's new technique will also make an explosive appearance! Keep your eyes peeled!

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