

High school

10

DXD

LIONHEART OF THE
ACADEMY FESTIVAL

**ICHIEI
ISHIBUMI**

ILLUSTRATION BY
Miyama-Zero

PARENTAL ADVISORY
WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT





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ACADEMY FESTIVAL**




At that moment, the prez
took my hand and
squeezed it tightly.

"...In that case...I would
like to be more..."

Bah!
With that, she leaned in
toward me, and...

In the sauna, the prez pushed
me down right where I sat,
all but falling over me!



**"Let's do this.
Today shall be a
fight to the death!
Bear no grudges
should you perish,
Issei Hyoudou!"
Sairnorg roared as
that golden radiance
fell upon him.**

**"My lion!
King of
Nemea!
King of
lions! Heed
my ferocity,
robe me
in your
glory!"**



LIONHEART OF THE ACADEMY FESTIVAL

10

ICHIEI ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY
MIYAMA-ZERO



Copyright



Volume 10

Ichiei Ishibumi

Translation by Haydn Trowell

Cover art by Miyama-Zero

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I'll get back up, no matter how many times it takes.

For her...

For my dreams...

Life.0

“Squishy, squishy squish!”

“““Squishy, squishy squish!”””

The children in the audience responded to my exaggerated cry with the brightest smiles imaginable.

The Academy Festival was just around the corner, yet I was standing in the middle of a stage at a large concert hall. It was part of a show in Lucifard, the old capital city of the underworld.

Of course, this was in my capacity as the hero of the hit children’s show *The Breast Dragon Emperor*. Normally, an actor filled in for me at events like this, but Sirzechs had offered me a chance to perform for myself today.

I couldn’t possibly refuse an offer straight from a Demon King. Although he *had* said that there was no pressure if I couldn’t make it...

“Here I go! Dragon Kick!”

“““Kiiiiick!”””

I lashed out theatrically at the monster playing the role of my opponent, which prompted the children to erupt in excited applause.

It was all so...embarrassing! Still, the joyous reactions of all those kids filled me with a tremendous sense of elation.

The venue was packed, most seats occupied by children or their mothers. People must have come from all over the underworld.

The stage was covered with flashy sets and equipment, and every time I made a move, the props lit up with fake explosions... Seriously, demon society had taken human special effects technology to the next level!

Beside me on the stage stood the prez, known as the Switch Princess, along with Kiba, who played the villainous Darkness Knight known as Fang.

When the prez in her Switch Princess costume waved to the crowd, her male fans and all the children gave a thunderous cheer.

There were just as many admirers on Kiba's side, mostly mothers and young women... Damn that cursed pretty boy! I was fuming with jealousy here!

All the same...

""""Breast Dragonnnnnn!""""

...I couldn't resist the adulation of the young fans who'd come all this way to see *me*.

Life.1

Preparing for the Academy Festival!

“Phew...”

The hero performance was finally over, so I went backstage for a break.

When I was finished here, I’d have to return to the human world to help prepare for Kuou Academy’s celebration. The Occult Research Club was planning a pretty large-scale event, and we were short on hands, so Kiba and I were pushing ourselves day after day to ensure things were ready on time.

“...It’s time now for the Breast Dragon’s Quiz Corner!”

“““Yaaaaay! Hellcat! Hellcaaaaat!”””

Koneko, who hosted the Quiz Corner, was greeted by a round of ecstatic cheers. She was insanely popular among a certain kind of fan—older men who were infatuated with petite female characters. A fair number of people had come just to see her...

We’d all wound up becoming pretty famous, albeit in a way that we couldn’t possibly have imagined. I was grateful for the attention, but I would have never expected *The Breast Dragon Emperor* to be such a hit... I guess with how little popular entertainment there was in the underworld, this kind of cheesy superhero stuff was still a novelty.

This little setup that Sirzechs had put together to add a bit of spice to life in the underworld and brighten everyone’s futures was an undeniable success.

Underworld media had been gushing nonstop about both the Loki attack and the incident in Kyoto. Reporters dedicated plenty of coverage to us members of Rias Gremory’s Familia, who had the unfortunate honor of getting wrapped up in both those events.

Perhaps owing to that, photographers had mobbed me when I arrived for the

show today.

Ever since the end of the Great War, flashy battles had become a rarity in demon society. Our successes were being treated as welcome news, especially considering that there had been so many terrorist attacks of late, not to mention the rapidly shifting alliances between the various forces, too complex by far for most to grasp.

Our successes had been broadcast to the children of the underworld with headlines like BREAST DRAGON SNATCHES ANOTHER GLORIOUS VICTORY! As far as the kids here were concerned, our real-world triumphs were indistinguishable from what they saw on television. In their minds, their fictional heroes were taking on real-life enemies ranging from the evil god Loki to the terrorist Khaos Brigade.

I cradled my head in my hands and breathed out a sigh.

I was overjoyed, but at the same time, I was so conflicted! Fights were supposed to be uncommon in the modern underworld, right? So why did we keep getting caught in the middle of so many?! Already we'd faced legendary beings, the old Demon King regime, and even a god! And to top it all off, our most recent fight had been with the descendants of true-blue human heroes! What were the odds of getting ensnared in all these crazy supernatural conflicts?!

Peace! Nothing could beat peace! All I wanted was to live in harmony with the prez, Asia, and Akeno! We might get up to some erotic activities now and then, but what I craved the most was an ordinary existence full of laughter and smiles! A romantic comedy! Yes, I had a perfectly normal dream, a yearning to live out my own serene, love-filled days!

So why did I keep getting swallowed up by this violent vortex?!

Admittedly, it was nice to see all those kids having so much fun. Today's event was honestly pretty enjoyable.

Still, I needed a break from the nonstop boss rush! I didn't want to die or drag my friends into danger. If anyone in our group was to perish, I'd be a wreck...

Nonetheless, it was precisely because we'd been pulled into all those battles that our Familia had become what it was today. The situation really was a mess.

We owed our unshakable team bond to all that conflict. Maybe pushing through impossible trials together was what made the greatest Familia?

Or perhaps it really was my dragon qualities, the innate power of attraction possessed by Heavenly Dragons, that had brought us all so close. I was actually pretty worried about that idea... With each passing day, I became more convinced that all these incidents were ultimately *my* fault.

Even Azazel had said that there seemed to be too many irregular occurrences lately...

...

I had to put a stop to these thoughts. The more I brooded over it, the more it'd get to me. There was nothing to do but accept what came and work to make the best of it.

"...Phew."

I decided to go to the bathroom to wash my face. I needed to do *something* to lift my mood.

Stepping out into the hall, I heard a commotion in the distance.

"Nooooo!"

It sounded like a kid crying his eyes out. Glancing around the corner, I spotted a mother speaking with a staff member near the back door as her child sobbed.

"I wanna meet the Breast Dragon!"

The kid was stomping his feet in anger, and his parent seemed at a loss for how to deal with the situation.

"I'm sorry. We've already finished distributing tickets for the handshake and autograph sessions...", the staff member apologized.

Oh, he didn't get a ticket to the autograph session? Apparently, the tickets had all sold out before the show even started. The event organizers tried to emulate how similar performances were run in the human world. However, for demons unfamiliar with human customs, it must have seemed bewildering to need a ticket to get someone's autograph or shake their hand.

“I—I see... We’re too late. They’ve already finished giving out the tickets,” the mother said to her son.

This only prompted the boy to start crying even harder. He clutched tight an action figure of me in my armor, practically treasuring it.

I couldn’t watch on and do nothing.

“Nooooo!”

...

I’d dispelled my armor a few minutes ago, yet I restarted the countdown.

A child weeping for his crushed dreams was too much to bear.

With a flash of red light, I reentered my Balance Breaker state. I made my way over with the visor portion of my mask retracted to show my face.

“What’s the matter?” I called out.

Mother, child, and the staff member all turned at the sound of my voice.

“Breast Dragon!” The child beamed in delight.

The staffer hurriedly explained the situation. “Oh, Mr. Hyoudou. These two guests here missed out on tickets to the autograph session, so...”

Nodding, I got down on one knee and asked the kid, “What’s your name?”

“...Lirenkus.”

“Thanks for coming to see me, Lirenkus.” I glanced up at the staff member. “Um, do you have anything to write with?”

“W-will this do...?” The staffer held out a marker.

“Your hat, the one with my picture. Do you mind if I write on it?”

The boy—Lirenkus—nodded three times.

Every time I signed my name, I was reminded of my ineptitude with the demon script. Kids looked up to me as a role model; the last thing I wanted was to disappoint them.

Whether fighting or writing, I was acutely aware of my need to improve.

I signed my name on Lirenkus's cap and placed it back on his head. Beaming brightly, the boy took it off to look and put it back on several times in a row.

"Thank you!" his mother said.

I placed a hand on the boy's head. "Lirenkus. You shouldn't cry. You need to be strong. No matter how many times you fall to the ground, you need to get back up to protect the girls around you."

With those words, I rose back to my feet and returned to the waiting area backstage.

The staff member walked beside me with a conflicted expression on her face. "Mr. Hyoudou... Please refrain from doing that again. We can't meet everyone's requests, so if you make exceptions..."

She was right. I'd acted without thinking. The event crew members were all doing their best, but they understood that fulfilling everyone's dreams was impossible.

If I kept making special allowances, it could cause trouble for them, betraying their efforts.

I should have recognized that. Honestly, I *did*. Yet I couldn't leave that kid in tears, either.

Yup. I was hopeless.

"I'm sorry. I'll be more careful," I apologized, stricken with guilt.

The staffer nodded in understanding, then returned to her post without further words.

I was genuinely remorseful. But still, I...

"That's my Issei. You were incredible."

Recognizing the prez's voice, I glanced around, and sure enough, there she was.

She approached and stroked my cheek with her hand. "That *was* a little rash of you, yet you kept that child's dream alive."

"Prez..."

Prez! She understood me better than anyone! This gesture alone was enough to lift my spirits! Ah, she really was the greatest woman I'd ever met.

I was touched. She always looked out for me.

At that moment, another familiar face appeared down the corridor.

"Oh dear. Greetings, Rias, Issei. What are you both doing out here?"

This newcomer was a flaxen-haired woman and the spitting image of the prez!

"M-Mother! And Millicas! I didn't know you were here!" The prez looked flustered, clearly taken aback by the pair's sudden appearance.

Yep, this woman, who seemed nearly the prez's twin, was none other than Rias's mother, Venelana!

"Rias! Issei! I really loved the show!"

Standing beside Venelana was a young boy—Millicas. He was as bright and lively as ever. Lately, he'd started addressing me like I was a member of the family... I was touched!

The prez's mother flashed us both a smile. "Yes, I wanted to see one of these events we're hosting for myself. Naturally, Millicas wanted to come along. You cut a fine image there, Issei. *Very virile*. It was a good performance."

Whoa, they both watched the whole thing?! I was embarrassed but, at the same time, filled with joy. Venelana's reason for attending made sense—the House of Gremory *was* responsible for managing the Breast Dragon Emperor franchise.

"Th-thank you!" I said gratefully.

I didn't want to be rude to the prez's mother, but more than that, I found myself powerless to resist her. She truly was a gorgeous beauty.

Venelana approached Rias and me, her heels *clacking* against the floor. "This superhero program has become an important revenue stream for the House of Gremory. Obviously, its value is immeasurable for the children of the underworld. I would be immensely grateful if you would continue working on behalf of our House, the underworld, and my daughter."

“Of course! I’ll push myself to my very limits, until my bones are ground to dust! I’d do anything for the prez’s mother!”

“Until your bones are ground to dust? That’s a Japanese expression, isn’t it? A good response. I would expect no less of a future scion of the Gremory name. Although...” Venelana peered at me with gentle eyes, stroking her chin, deep in thought. I felt a sudden chill! That look of hers was filled with sex appeal! “I don’t like it when you call me ‘the prez’s mother.’ You should address me as Mother-in-Law or just Mother. ”

That again? What exactly did the prez’s family expect from me?

“B-but I don’t want to seem rude...”

“There’s nothing rude about it. In fact, you would be embarrassing me if you continued addressing me publicly as anything less.” Venelana’s expression underwent a complete reversal, turning powerful and stern. “Rias,” she continued, turning to the prez with narrowed eyes. “It seems you’ve been lax instructing him.”

“I’m sorry, Mother. It’s just—”

“You always have an excuse... This is the man who will stand by your side as leader of our family. You must see that he behaves himself accordingly. And have you decided on your order of precedence? I assume Asia and Akeno are included, at the very least?”

Asia? Akeno? Huh?

“If it’s what your man desires, then it’s your responsibility as head to see to it. Assuming that it will increase further, you have to set an appropriate foundation. In your father’s case, I was the one who took the reins. It’s commonplace for other women to be attracted to strong and charismatic men. Sirzechs, being a Demon King, may have chosen only Grayfia, but *your* man isn’t aiming for such heights, correct? In that case, there’s no problem... Don’t tell me you haven’t decided yet? I thought you’d inherited my assertiveness, yet now I discover you slacking off before the final hurdle once again. Once you’re in *that* kind of relationship, you gain a sense of authority over the other women around you. Rias. Can you really take this to its conclusion without intervention from Grayfia or me?”

The prez looked totally deflated by her mother's scolding. Just like Grayfia, Venelana tended to let loose with a rapid-fire barrage of her dissatisfactions. Both older women seemed quite displeased with Rias.

It sounded like they were concerned about the family as a whole... Th-that included me...right?

I...didn't quite get it. Was it some kind of special Gremory family rule? Or a ceremony, maybe?

Honestly, I was still struggling to piece together what had happened at those ancient ruins the prez and I visited a while back. I couldn't shake the feeling that *something* was taking place without my full knowledge.

All I wanted was to keep living happily alongside Rias...

"Ahem." The prez's mother cleared her throat and ended her tirade with a brief "Well, that's that, then."

Maybe that meant we could go now? No sooner did that thought cross my mind than she turned her scorching gaze my way.

"Issei. You need to pay attention, too. First of all, you need to remember how to address the other members of the House of Gremory. Forget about me for now—what about Rias? You can't keep calling her Prez forever... That's the most important thing here." Venelana pointed her finger at my nose. "Do you *like* Rias?" she questioned.

"Y-yes! Of course! I respect her, and she's so important to me! I'll protect her no matter what. Even if it costs me my life!"

Those were my true-blue feelings!

The prez's face turned scarlet. Ah, had I embarrassed her by stating the obvious?

Venelana nodded. "Very well. I've witnessed the heartwarming nature of your master-servant relationship for myself. Let's take this one step further. I want you to think on what Rias means to you in your private life."

—.

What she meant to me...in private?

Well, that was obvious. She was the woman I'd fallen in love with, my darling Rias.

That's why I had to keep her safe. Yet more than that...I wanted to get to know her.

Still, right now, that was a terrifying thought.

"Could you die for me?"

A woman's voice echoed in the back of my mind. I shook my head, trying to banish the thought.

The prez's mother left us. Millicas waved to me over his shoulder. I returned the gesture.

The prez, still flushed next to me, cleared her throat. "W-well, why don't we head home and finish preparations for the Academy Festival?"

"Okay!"

The big stuff could wait for now while I focused on the immediate future. The Academy Festival was just around the corner!

And there was one other thing I had to take care of.



The following day, I found myself standing outside a first-year classroom—Koneko and Gasper's.

Ravel Phenex had just transferred to Kuou Academy. She was even more the dignified high-class young lady than the prez was, and this was her first time attending a school for normal people.

Would she be able to cope with everyday academy life? Fretting over the question, I'd made my way here during my lunch break.

"...Huh? Isn't he that second-year pervert...?"

"Gross. They say he can hypnotize you with his eyes, and then he has his way with you..."

"I heard he keeps all the school idols caged up so he can control them... He's a monster..."

The first-year girls all fixed me with baleful glares... And this was hardly the first time they'd done so! I had to learn to ignore it! You may think I was crying, but that's wrong! I had a little sweat in my eyes, that was all!

"Oh? Did you come to check on her, too, Issei?"

I turned around at the sound of Rias's voice. "Y-you too, Prez?"

"Yes. I was a little curious."

We peeked into the classroom together, spotting Koneko and Gasper (in a corner of the room where he wouldn't stand out) speaking with each other. As for Ravel...

Whoa, that's her, with her hair done up in curled ringlets! Heh, her uniform really suits her.

"Do you have all the textbooks, Phenex?"

"What a strange name, *Phenex*. It's so cool!"

"I'm so glad we have another foreign transfer student after Gaspy!"

The other girls in Ravel's class had surrounded her! Well, she'd just transferred in today, so it made sense that everyone wanted to get to know her. If a foreign beauty had entered my class, everyone would likely treat her like an idol.

Given Ravel's typically superior attitude, I expected her to come out with something like *Oh-ho-ho! Ask me anything! I'll oblige!*

Surprisingly, the reality was quite different. Ravel looked uncertain how to reply. "U-um... Er..."

Her eyes wavered back and forth, as though she didn't know where to look.

At that moment, her gaze locked on to the prez and me. A few first-years, probably fans of the prez's, had noticed us as well and were starting to whisper.

"Excuse me!" Ravel announced, jumping up from her seat and marching our way.

She grabbed us and led the way out of the classroom, down the hall, and around a corner.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Ravel?” I asked uncertainly.

At this, her cheeks turned pink in embarrassment. “I—I’ve never transferred schools before...s-so I don’t know what to say to anyone... And I—I’m a demon, so I’m unsure of what commonalities I share with human students...”

Ah. She *was* a demon, and a high-class one at that. It wasn’t astonishing that she didn’t know how to interact with regular students in the human world. I could appreciate her predicament.

Unlike her usual haughty self, this side of Ravel was pretty cute.

“You do *want* to talk to your classmates, right?” the prez questioned.

“...O-of course! I—I’m working to become a better person! I think it’s important to associate with people outside the nobility and to learn something from commoners!”

Now that was an admirable way of thinking. Completely different from her brother, Riser.

Riser had sunken into depression after losing to me, but we’d managed to help him back to his feet after Ravel came to us for advice. Thanks to that, he conquered his fear of dragons and returned to his usual lifestyle. Apparently, he intended to return to Rating Games in the not-too-distant future.

He wasn’t a bad guy. Like me, he was just a bit of a pervert.

Okay, back to Ravel. Basically, she didn’t know how to converse or deal with her peers. Frankly, I thought she’d be able to work it out if she just gave it a shot...

I pondered her situation for a moment, then clapped my hands as I struck on an idea. Yep, there was only one way to solve this.

“Hold on a second. I need to get Koneko.”

Just as I spun around to return to the first-year classroom...

“...Did you call me?”

...her voice came from right next to me! And Gasper was there, too! Had they followed us out here?!

Whatever the case, she was here, and I had a favor to ask.

“Koneko, I need your help.”

“...With what?”

“Can you talk to Ravel...? Or rather, keep her company as she acclimates to school life? You’re in the same class, right? Please.”

I’d heard that Koneko was one of the most popular girls at Kuou Academy, and she got along very well with all her classmates, too. If people saw her talking to Ravel, that would probably be enough to help our new transfer student open up!

However, Koneko seemed displeased by my idea. Her eyebrows twitched, and her mouth curled in evident annoyance. It was a cute reaction, but clearly, something was wrong. Had I offended her?

After giving it a little thought, Koneko finally replied, “If that’s what you want, I guess I don’t mind...”

Way to go! I knew I could count on you!

“All right then, Ravel. Koneko here will help you get to know—”

“Wussy Roast Chicken Princess,” Koneko cut in quietly.

...

There was a brief silence. I could see a vein throbbing on Ravel’s forehead.

Voice trembling, she asked, “Wh-what did you just say...?”

“Wuss,” Koneko answered without so much as skipping a beat.

Wh-what’s going on here?!

Before I could get a handle on the situation, the two girls started bickering!

“Y-y-you! How dare you address a member of the House of Phenex in such a fashion...!”

“...You talk *now*, but you’re pretty quick to shrivel up like a wimp. I thought you’d worked up some backbone seeing as you decided to come to the human world... And now you’re bothering Issei... You clueless Roast Chicken Princess.”



Snap!

I heard something break inside Ravel! Her whole body was exuding a frightening aura! Even her hair was beginning to move on its own!

Koneko glowered, refusing to back down!

“Nnnnnnggggghhhhh! I—I didn’t *want* to worry Issei...! Y-you insolent *nekomata*...!”

“...Roast Chicken.”

I could practically see the figures of a cat and a firebird rearing up behind the two, glaring fiercely at each other!

“Aaaaahhhhh... I—I’m scared!” A terrified Gasper fled behind my back!

Hey, I’m scared, too, you know?!

“H-hold on, you two! Why are you getting so angry?! You need to get along! You’re classmates!”

I stood between Koneko and Ravel, doing my best to defuse the situation... A battle of feline and fowl in the middle of school! It was terrifying! I had to put a stop to it. Both Koneko and Ravel were my treasured underclassmen.

“Come on, now, let’s all calm down. No one’s bothering me. If something’s troubling either of you, I’m happy to talk whenever you need to.”

““Whose side are you on?!”” the two girls snapped in unison.

How was I supposed to respond to that...?

“...You’re too kind, Issei,” the prez whispered beside me.

“Ah.”

At that moment, a first-year girl walked past us, tripping and dropping a pile of handouts all over the hall. That was what happened when you didn’t look where you were going, I guess.

I bent down, thinking to help her collect the scattered papers, but Ravel was one step ahead of me.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “We’re in the same class, aren’t we? I don’t

think I know your name yet, though..."

“Th-thank you... So you recognized me, Phenex? My name is Murota.”

“You can call me Ravel.”

Ravel was acting friendly and generous! The fact that she had reached to help practically by reflex was proof enough that she was kind. Plus, she already recognized the face of a classmate despite transferring in this morning! Murota looked positively touched!

After a second, Koneko and Gasper helped pick up the documents, too.

While they were both picking up sheets, Ravel's and Koneko's eyes met.

““Hmph!””

Wha—?!

The two of them quickly looked away from each other.

Ha-ha-ha. Seems like they've got some challenges ahead.

Later, I heard that Ravel began opening up to her classmates thanks to her encounter with Murota in the hallway. Koneko was watching out for her as well.

Ravel's school life was off to a good start.



“Now then, let’s get to work,” the prez stated.

""""""""""Right!"""""""""" we responded in one loud, energetic voice.

After school, we members of the Occult Research Club, with Ravel now among our ranks, set to our preparations for the Academy Festival.

Our set piece for the event was none other than...an occult mansion!

The idea was to use the entire old school building to house a number of attractions. We had a haunted house, a fortune teller's room, a café, an occult research report, and a bunch of other ideas that we'd devised together.

Since the Occult Research Club was in charge of the entire old school building, we decided to use it to the fullest. There were a great many unused classrooms throughout, plus others that had been turned into storage areas. We intended to use those spaces for our haunted house, fortune teller room, and café.

As such, we were in the middle of carrying out all the necessary renovations. Using our demon powers would have made the job quick and easy, but the prez wanted us to work by hand as much as possible, and we were all happy to oblige.

This building may have been the headquarters of the Gremory Familia, but it was also a part of Kuou Academy. Our goal was to finish the festival attractions as students, not as demons.

The girls were focusing on designing costumes and redecorating the rooms. They'd made an unused classroom into a workshop and were preparing costumes for the café and the haunted house. For Ravel, who had just joined the Occult Research Club, this was an entirely new experience. All the same, she was doing her very best to pitch in.

Kiba and I were devoting our time to modifying the building itself, cutting and assembling pieces of wood and other materials with saws and hammers.

Strictly speaking, the girls were all demons, too, and were considerably stronger than regular humans. They would've had no problem with the heavy-lifting side. The point was to carry out our expected roles as students, so we men had been tasked with the more physical stuff.

"Issei. Hold that for me."

"Right."

Kiba and I were grappling with a large piece of lumber outside.

Azazel and Rossweisse, being members of the teaching staff, were attending an afterschool meeting. Apparently, several details about the Academy Festival had yet to be fully decided. I had a feeling the main topic was precautions for visiting parents and guardians.

My mom and dad would be attending, although it was mainly to see Asia.

If this was anything like the Sports Festival, the prez's folks might also stop by. Dealing with Sirzechs and Leviathan dropping in at the same time would be a nightmare...but that was a problem for the student council.

While we sawed through some lumber, Kiba asked, "Hey, Issei. Have you

heard of Diehauser Belial?”

That name did ring a bell. I’d overheard the prez and Akeno mention him a few times, and the prez had watched some videos of him for her research.

“Only by name. He’s the Rating Game champion, right?”

Kiba nodded. “Yeah. He’s number one in the official rankings. The reigning king—a living, breathing monster. He’s also the current head of the House of Belial. He’s a true master of the Rating Game and has been at the top seemingly forever. People call him Emperor Belial.”

Emperor Belial.

That was an impressive title, even if he wasn’t a Demon King.

Kiba continued even as we worked. “Every Rating Game contestant in the top twenty is said to be on an entirely different level, with the top ten being considered living legends. The top five are unshakable. In particular, Bedeze Abaddon in third place, Roygun Belphegor in second place, and Diehauser Belial in first place are demons of the highest order, comparable in power and strength to current Demon Kings. Those three’s positions are said to be rock-solid, barring a major crisis like another war. They’re praised as the Rating Game’s flawless crystals, polished to perfection thanks to having pulled through so many matches.”

So they’ve achieved perfection through combat...? Just what sort of demons are they?! Demon King-class?! And they’re allowed to compete?!

As I thought on it, I realized that wasn’t too unusual. Old Tannin was also an ultimate-class demon, and he’d placed among the Rating Game’s top ten. He wasn’t retired, exactly, but he dedicated his time to training young dragons rather than participating himself.

“I’ve never heard of the Houses of Abaddon and Belphegor before...,” I admitted.

Nope, I didn’t recall the names of the second-and third-place guys. Theirs weren’t among the list of the Seventy-Two Pillars I had memorized.

“That’s only natural. They’re unlisted, after all—Extra Demons, as they say.

It's a well-known fact that their families want nothing to do with the current government. Some people even call them heretics. Bedeze and Roygun have basically cut ties with their relatives to take part in matches."

Huh. So there were demons participating despite personal issues? To think they were so eager to compete that they'd essentially left their families behind... Rating Games sure had a powerful allure.

Combat, power, wealth, women, status—all one's desires could be satisfied through success in Rating Games. Naturally, I found that incredibly attractive, too.

Such was the dream that the present authorities had bestowed upon demonkind—ambition.

"You know, if Sirzechs and the other Demon Kings joined in, I'm pretty sure the rankings would be completely different," I pointed out.

"That can't be helped. The rules are clear—Demon Kings are not allowed. Their servants technically can, but none of them seem to be interested, either. I get the impression their Familia members aspire only to serve their lords. It's important to remember that real-life combat and Rating Game battles aren't quite the same thing. The game might have been established to make up for the lack of actual fights in modern-day society, but it has a lot of special rules, and the tactics and strategies differ from combat with a real enemy. I don't think it'd be all that unusual for a skilled fighter in the real world to perform poorly in the arena."

It was rare to see Kiba expressing his opinions to this extent. Was this a sign that he was opening up to me?

If what he said was true, it was possible that the current reigning champion's team might be stronger than Sirzechs's. As unpleasant as the thought was, Diehauser Belial's team could potentially outclass a Demon King's.

"So Rating Games are basically simulations, because there are no real-life full-scale battles right now," I responded. "And you're saying we shouldn't forget that they're a different beast entirely from the real thing?"

Kiba nodded.

Our Familia had gained plenty of real-world combat experience, but we still struggled to deal with some Rating Games' special rules. Our match against the Sitri Familia had proven that point. If we intended to keep competing, we would need to do so with a fresh mindset.

Kiba hammered a nail into the wood. "With you and the president aiming for the top, Diehauser Belial is going to be an unavoidable obstacle. If you want to move up in the demon world, you'd better start thinking of the current high-ranking teams as future opponents. As the president's Knight, I'll have to improve, too."

The prez wouldn't be entering the Rating Game in earnest until she'd graduated from university, which was four to five years away. It felt so distant, but something told me it would pass in the blink of an eye.

How far would I go in that time? Would I be able to hold my own against Emperor Belial...?

Before any of that, I had to focus on the matter at hand. I shook my head and lifted my handsaw into the air.

"For now, let's just worry about the match with Sairaorg."

Kiba responded with a forceful nod.

The two of us had been training for our upcoming match, as had the others. We couldn't afford to fall behind the Bael Familia!

"They already have a firm grasp of our capabilities. I'm sure they've analyzed our fighting techniques from recordings of our previous matches. The only information they're probably unaware of is your new technique and Xenovia's Ex-Durendal."

Recordings of our earlier Rating Game bouts were accessible to the public, so it was natural to assume our opponents were studying them.

They'd have a firm understanding of my Balance Breaker and Kiba's.

"I'm sure they're all pretty up-to-date on us," I remarked.

"Naturally. I would have my doubts about any King, and their Familia, too, if they didn't do their research beforehand. Just saying 'Bring it on' won't cut it at

this level. For that reason, we're also gathering everything we can on Sairaorg and his team..."

We'd done extensive research before our match against that show-off Zephyrdor Glasya-Labolas and were doing the same with the Bael Familia.

I doubted our last opponent matched our upcoming one, though. After all, Sairaorg was the rare sort of demon who kept a dedicated training regimen, just like we did.

Undoubtedly, he would come at us with power far greater than that of Glasya-Labolas.

"You know, they may have caught wind of your new power-up. And I think Sairaorg sensed something different in you during your sparring contest the other day. He'll be on his guard. The problem will be when to use that new technique of yours. It will be most effective before he realizes how it works."

Sairaorg had acted as though he'd recognized something in me during our fistfight at the Gremory residence before the trip to Kyoto.

That could have led him to believe I'd awakened new powers during the incident with the Hero Faction.

As for the many facets of my new ability...

"Each form has its own quirks, and I don't think I'll be able to use any of them against Sairaorg more than once."

The Red Dragon Emperor's Three-Pronged Promotion, the Illegal Move Triaina (or just Triaina for short), came with strengths and weaknesses, depending on which specialized form of an Evil Piece was utilized.

The Welsh Sonic Boost Knight granted me godlike speed, but it did so by removing a lot of my armor, leaving my defense low. I could compensate for that by shifting modes to the Welsh Dragonic Rook, but that drained energy. Rapidly changing back and forth between the two would be too difficult to manage...

The Welsh Blaster Bishop was capable of unleashing a huge amount of demonic power, but it took time to charge, and it would be useless if I wasn't

able to score a direct hit.

The Welsh Dragonic Rook granted immense power and protection, but by thickening my Scale Mail, it hindered my movement.

In short, they were all powerful, but they each also had an easily identifiable weakness. The stronger they were in one area, the weaker they became in another. I could make up for that to some extent by stringing combos together, but the strain on my energy and stamina would be immense.

“Combination moves could help compensate for each mode’s shortcomings, but that will exhaust you pretty quickly. However, you won’t be able to survive if you *don’t* use them, so it’s really your only option... Keeping it up for a long time carries a tremendous risk, though...”

“Yeah. It’s better suited to short battles. I should probably keep it in my pocket for as long as possible.”

Triaina worked best in fights that could be finished swiftly. It had only worked as well as it had against Cao because he’d never seen it before.

Exposing even one of these new Promotions gave my opponent clues to deduce how the others operated.

It was only natural. Seeing someone with a specialized Knight Promotion would lead you to think they had unique versions of other pieces. If I used it right, I had the potential to end the match in a single string and inflict major damage.

The glaring problem was the charge time for Triaina Bishop.

For now, I would have to set my new ability aside. If worst came to worst, I would bring it out, but otherwise...

“Yep. I might have to go for a combo move... Maybe if I time the Promotion just right and try a whole range of simulations...”

The order in which I employed each individual role in a combination move was vital. I’d started with the Bishop piece in Kyoto, but generally speaking, that would be a bad move. I was a sitting duck while I prepared my ranged energy attacks. Was it best to start with a ranged strike, then close the distance before

my opponent could react with my Triaina Knight Promotion, and finally pummel them after shifting to my Triaina Rook mode?

Hmm... That was exactly what I'd done back in Kyoto. Couldn't I think of any other ideas...?

"I'll keep you company while you come to experiment with each of your Promotions. I also want to try out some new techniques in our training bouts."

Huh? Kiba's declaration filled me with a touch of dread.

"Techniques? Seriously? So you've worked it out?"

"Yes. To a point. Anyway, how's Ddraig? I haven't seen you two talking much lately," Kiba observed.

With that, I activated my gauntlet and called out to the dragon inside me, who had remained silent all this time. "Ddraig, how are you feeling?"

He responded to my question aloud so that Kiba could hear, his voice unusually lethargic. *"Ah. I've had a lot on my mind lately... Haaah..."*

The great Red Dragon Emperor let out a deep sigh...

He'd been moping since we returned from Kyoto. All the frightening power-ups that I was unlocking lately seemed to be troubling him.

Ddraig had been reduced to tears on more than one occasion in recent memory. Everyone kept telling me that I had to be a pretty bad Sacred Gear vessel to make a Heavenly Dragon cry.

Sorry for being such a pervert, buddy...

"Heh. An all-male clandestine meeting? The Red Dragon Emperor really doesn't discriminate, huh?" Azazel had arrived.

"Cut us some slack, Teach. Hold on, has the staff meeting for the festival finished?"

"I slipped out, saying I wasn't feeling the best. I know we've got a lot of foreign students here, but damn, they're going overboard with all the precautions. It's one argument after another. Rossweisse can handle things for a bit while I get some air."

What?! Azazel was just as selfishly haphazard and insincere as ever! Fortunately, our Valkyrie was serious-minded and diligent...

“Ah, Ddraig,” Azazel called out to my gauntlet. “You remember what we talked about? Well, I found you a good counselor.”

“Ah. Thanks...”

I was taken aback by this exchange!

“H-h-hold on a second! What do you mean, a *counselor*?!”

Seriously?! Why wasn't I aware of this?!

Azazel scratched his cheek. “Well, Ddraig sent me a private message through Fafnir's jewel. I noticed he's been pretty depressed lately. Sounds like whenever he hears the word *breasts*, it tears at his heart.”

I was rendered speechless by this admission...

What on earth...?!

“Seriously?” I asked Ddraig.

The Heavenly Dragon sighed deeply. “*Yeah. Sorry, partner. I just haven't been able to get excited lately... It won't affect you using your powers, though, so don't worry... Haaah...*”

It sounded like Ddraig was worse off than I had imagined! Was he having mental problems?!

“I-it isn't because I delved into the Sacred Gear or because I got that new technique, is it...?”

Was I to blame for Ddraig's current state?

Azazel shook his head. “Nah. He's been shocked by seeing all your breast miracles. Even if his soul is trapped in a Sacred Gear, he's still one of only two Heavenly Dragons, you know? He's got his pride. Any creature like him would get depressed after seeing you get stronger from tits so often.”

—! I was so stunned that my legs gave out, and I dropped to my knees.

H-how could this be...?! Had my tapping into the power of breasts for power-ups wounded his heart?! When I reflected on it, I realized Azazel was right.

Every time I used boobs to my advantage, Ddraig wound up crying.

I—I didn't mean to hurt him...

"I'll forward you the counselor's number later. It sure wasn't easy finding someone who specializes in dragons. Anyway, I'd better see how things are coming along in the old school building."

With a wave of his hand, Azazel left Kiba and me behind.

I stroked my gauntlet, still aghast over my poor partner.

I'm sorry, Ddraig. You've always been there to help me, and now I've driven you to the point of misery... All because of my perverted powers...

I'd been striving to develop a power I could use in place of my Juggernaut Drive. Although I'd achieved that goal, I felt guilty for the price that came with it...

"No, your power-ups aren't all bad... They're quite effective, actually... It's just... I suppose I'm not as spiritually hardy as I believed. I'm sorry..."

Ddraig! I was ignorant of how much this was hurting him! Had I known, I would've made his mental care a top priority!

"Don't apologize! This is my fault! I was only thinking about myself and didn't stop to consider how those actions would affect you! I kept relying on you without offering anything in return. I'm a failure!"

"Partner..." Ddraig seemed touched, his voice tearful.

I hugged my left arm with my free hand and called out, "I'll help you! There will probably be a whole lot more breasts from here on out, but I'll be here for you!"

"Yeah. At this rate, my heart will keep on getting torn to pieces. I'll leave everything to you..."

Aaaaahhhhh! Ddraaaaaaiiiiig! I'm sorry!

Kiba watched this emotional scene from the sidelines, obviously unsure how to react. Ultimately, he went with a forced smile.

"Are you still working, Issei?" The prez had emerged from the old school

building. “Is something wrong? It looks like the preparations are taking a little longer than expected... I suppose I’m wasting your time talking, huh?”

I waved my hand to dismiss that notion. “Not at all.”

Had she come to check on us?

“Sairaorg’s butler is here,” the prez explained. “He says he has a favor to ask you and me in private.”

This was a development I hadn’t expected.



The following day, the prez and I made our way to the underworld territory of the House of Sitri. A luxurious limousine ferried us along a road through a forest abundant in unspoiled nature. I had a bouquet of flowers in my hands—a gift I’d been trusted with looking after.

“It’s from my mother,” the prez said while we rode in the car.

Sairaorg’s butler had insisted on speaking with us both about an urgent matter and so had contacted the House of Gremory. The prez’s mother had accepted on Rias’s behalf.

Venelana was born to the Bael family, too. She’d probably accepted the butler’s request because of that connection.

“Our reason for coming aside, the Sitri territory really is rich with nature,” I remarked.

“Yes,” the prez agreed, nodding. “Among the various swaths of territory belonging to high-class demon families, the Sitri’s has a great many important nature reserves. There are a lot of beautiful places to visit here. We should bring everyone else with us next time.”

Hmm. So this part of the underworld was blessed with organic beauty. The mountains surrounded by trees of so many colors were certainly a sight to behold.

As I stared out the window, the prez added, “It also has some of the best medical facilities in the underworld, too.”

“Medical facilities?”

“Yes. That’s where we’re headed—one of the leading hospitals.”

“A-a hospital...? We’re going to a hospital?”

I certainly hadn’t expected that. Did it have to do with one of Sairaorg’s, or rather, one of the prez’s relatives? H-had someone been hurt...? Surely, it wasn’t Sairaorg himself, right? He hadn’t gotten injured by overexerting himself training before our match, had he...?

I was speechless, unable to comment on this dire subject. The limousine continued through the forest, eventually emerging into an open area.

Our drive went on for another ten minutes, finally concluding in the drop-off zone in front of a large building. We stepped out of the car.

“We’ve been expecting you.”

A middle-aged man dressed in a butler’s outfit greeted us, bowing formally. He had a crisp, disciplined air and seemed capable of managing practically any task thrown his way without missing a beat.

“Please show us in,” the prez replied.

“Come with me.”

The prez and I followed behind the butler, moving through the expansive hospital to an elevator.

“Issei, you know that my mother was born to the House of Bael, yes?” the prez asked quietly.

“Y-yeah. That makes you and Sairaorg cousins, right?”

“It does. My mother is the older sister of Sairaorg’s father, and he’s the current head of the House of Bael. However, the two were born of different mothers. My uncle is the son of his father’s foremost wife, while my mother is the child of his second wife.”

So the House of Bael’s current head and the prez’s mother were half-siblings. It must have been a complicated family tree, what with both a first and a second wife...

“And my aunt’s family—Sairaorg’s mother’s clan—is one of the Seventy-Two

Pillars, the House of Vapula. They're a great, noble lineage known for ruling over mythical lions."

"Vapula... And lions..."

Sairaorg sure had an impressive heritage.

The elevator came to a stop at the uppermost floor. Passing through the doors, we found ourselves in a busy ward. The butler led us down the corridors for several minutes until we reached our destination.

"In here, Lady Rias."

The prez and the butler entered a private hospital room. I followed after them and discovered a gorgeous woman asleep on the bed inside.

"...Greetings, Auntie," the prez said, gazing at the woman through eyes filled with sorrow.

Hold on, 'Auntie'? She can't possibly mean...

The butler took the bouquet of flowers from my hand and explained, "This is Lady Misra Bael, Master Sairaorg's mother."

Yep. My hunch had proven correct.

She was sound asleep, breathing through a ventilator... I didn't recognize the greater machine she was hooked up to, but it looked like a life-support system. Its design was different from those I'd seen in the human world, so I couldn't guess its precise function.

For her to be hospitalized like this, clearly something was wrong with her.

The butler, still holding the bouquet, broke down into sobs. "The reason I've asked you here today, Lady Rias, Red Dragon Emperor, is to beg you to help wake Lady Misra from her sleep..."

I was taken aback by the butler's sudden tears, unsure how to respond.

Thankfully, the prez took the initiative. "I'll have to fill in Issei on the details."

Thus she began explaining the turbulent lives of mother and child.

Sairaorg was the product of a union between his father, the head of the House of Bael, and his mother, hailing from the noble lion-ruling House of

Vapula.

Everyone had rejoiced at the birth of a new heir.

However, no sooner had Sairaorg come into this world than he was faced with a terrible truth. He possessed virtually no demonic powers to speak of and was unable to wield the House of Bael's characteristic power of destruction.

For generations, the head of his family had been blessed with strength in abundance, and their destructive ability was simply taken as a given. Yet Sairaorg lacked it from the moment he was born.

His father, despairing, directed his anger at his wife.

"What did you do with my clan's powers?! How could you have given life to this defect?!"

A defect.

Simply because he had been born without demonic abilities or his ancestors' powers of destruction, his father had abandoned him. In the same way, his mother, having produced a boy seen as a failure, became the target of her husband's scorn.

She was branded a stain on the House of Bael, the mother of a *faulty* child.

"It was too cruel. Except for my family and those from the House of Vapula, practically everyone connected to the House of Bael in some way blamed Lady Misra. They treated her horribly," the prez told me, her eyes as wet as the butler's. "When the rumors reached the House of Gremory, my mother tried to bring Aunt Misra to our territory for her protection, but the Baels refused."

People had condemned Venelana, saying that someone who had left the family for another shouldn't speak out for a wife who had married into the main branch.

On top of that, the Baels resented the fact that Sirzechs, of the House of Gremory, had not only inherited their powers of destruction but also had become so successful in the underworld.

I suppose I could understand their resentment. Those unique abilities had manifested in the children of another House instead of the family's rightful heir.

There could be no irony more painful for the House of Bael.

“If not for the Demon Kings, whose titles aren’t hereditary, the princely House of Bael would rank among the most senior of demon lineages. One can’t simply speak out against them without consequence. And they’re exceptionally prideful, always worried about how others see them. As far as they were concerned, Aunt Misra and Sairaorg were nothing but trouble.”

The House of Vapula had requested that Lady Misra and Sairaorg be permitted to return to them, but the Baels’ response had been a cruel one.

“His Lordship refused to relinquish Master Sairaorg,” the butler explained. “He wouldn’t allow his family’s shame to be known to the world. Naturally, Lady Misra couldn’t leave her son alone. Without her protection, the young Sairaorg would have been locked away, forced to live a life of disgrace. In the end, Lady Misra declined help from her family and chose to live in a remote region of the Bael territory with Master Sairaorg and a small number of attendants, myself included.”

Although their new abode was isolated, staying within the Bael territory meant being under constant surveillance. The main family of the House of Bael wouldn’t permit Sairaorg’s existence to become public knowledge.

Thus the main family forced mother and son to live in seclusion.

With practically no support from her husband, Lady Misra moved to the countryside with her young child.

“For someone brought up in high society like Lady Misra, living alone and unsupported must have been particularly difficult,” the butler said. “But even so, she gave Master Sairaorg an exemplary upbringing. She knew when to be strict with him and when to be kind.”

A demon with no powers to speak of would be the target of discrimination no matter where they went.

Even in a more rural region, he was often the target of scorn. He was constantly tormented and bullied for having powers inferior to low-and middle-class demons.

“Nonetheless, whenever Sairaorg returned home in tears, Lady Misra would

always have a strong reminder for him.”

“Even if you lack demonic powers, you still have a splendid body. If you come up short in one area, make up for it with something else! Whether it’s brute strength, knowledge and wisdom, or speed, seize it! You’re a son of the House of Bael, no matter what anyone says. Even if you don’t have the power of destruction...”

“So long as you don’t give up, you’ll eventually prevail,” the prez finished. “That’s something Sairaorg told me once. He said it was an important lesson he learned from his mother.”

“So long as you don’t give up, you’ll eventually prevail.”

That phrase resonated in my chest.

“Behind the scenes, Lady Misra continued to apologize to the main family. She repeatedly begged their pardon for her son’s lack of destructive power. There were many times she broke down while he slept by her side... I’m sure the young master himself realized that after a while. One day, he stopped running home crying and decided to stand up and face everything head-on.”

He confronted those who disparaged and belittled him for what he lacked, and no matter how many times he kept falling to the ground, he always pulled himself back up.

This new Sairaorg had an unshakable goal. *“I will create an underworld where demons of any background can achieve their dreams through deeds alone.”*

Demon society may have been ostensibly meritocratic, but in reality, there was an enormous gulf between those born with high social standings and everyone below them. Strength did little for lower-class demons hoping to live the lives they desired.

Sairaorg’s ambition struck me as similar to Chairwoman Sona’s.

As for me... Well, I was unusually blessed. I was a low-class demon but also a member of Rias Gremory’s Familia, and my master was exceptionally kind.

Nonetheless, there were still those from high-ranking noble families who discriminated against demons of lesser rank.

I couldn't begin to imagine the prejudice that Sairaorg endured at the hands of his own family.

Around the time when Sairaorg was old enough to take on mid-level demons by himself, something happened to his mother.

"It's a disease unique to demons. It isn't particularly common, but those who develop it fall into a sleep from which they never wake. As such, they have to be kept on life support at medical institutions like this," the prez explained, forlornness in her eyes.

In other words, Sairaorg's mother had fallen victim to that incurable ailment.

Doctors had tried every treatment imaginable, but none proved effective. Nonetheless, Sairaorg continued to push ahead.

"Master Sairaorg continued to train until he reached a state of near perfection, ultimately defeating his younger half-brother in a contest of ability to secure his position as the family's next heir," the butler said.

Sairaorg's younger sibling undoubtedly possessed his family's characteristic power of destruction. However, Sairaorg won and took his place as next in line for the House of Bael. This was a lot more complicated than I'd imagined...

At that moment, a question occurred to me.

"So Sairaorg defeated his brother and went back to the main House, right? Then, what is his mother doing here? Is the medical care at this hospital better than what would be offered in the Bael territory?" I asked.

"That's part of it...," the prez answered. "But the main reason is that Aunt Misra's life would be in danger if she was taken back there."

Her life would be in danger?! W-was it that unsafe?!

"Sairaorg certainly usurped his brother's place, but there are still a great many individuals who despise him for what he lacks. And with Aunt Misra bedridden, she would make an easy target. So Sairaorg asked Sona to help move her here, to the Sitri territory."

So the House of Bael was still ridden with internal strife over its future leader. I was sure happy that I wasn't involved with any noble intrigue... Was the House

of Gremory just unusually peaceful? As easy to get along with as the prez's family was, this dark side of demon society was truly horrifying.

The butler wiped his eyes with his handkerchief. "I asked you both here for a special reason. Please, won't you help cure Lady Misra's disease? I've heard that the Red Dragon Emperor can listen to the secret voice inside a woman's heart. People say his breast powers are different from regular demon magic, that they're capable of bringing about miracles. So please, won't you listen to Lady Misra's thoughts? I've already consulted with her doctors. So long as you don't use harmful magic, they're happy for you to try..."

Breast powers?! People are using the name that Azazel made up on a whim?!

B-basically, this butler guy was asking me to use my Boob-Lingual technique! On Sairaorg's mother! But she was sick! Was this really okay?! That ability was undeniably erotic!

Boob-Lingual tapped into something mysterious that allowed me to converse with breasts. In a way, it was a somewhat invasive technique... But at least it wasn't the sort that endangered the target's life. That butler was a daring guy to ask me for this kind of help, though.

Back in Kyoto, the first-generation Sun Wukong had helped me use Boob-Lingual to get through to someone else seemingly beyond all hope, so maybe I could accomplish the same with Sairaorg's mother?

Would it really work on someone who had fallen so ill?

People's feelings on my absurd technique seemed to have utterly flipped! They all hated it initially, yet lately, they took it far too seriously! Boob-Lingual had gotten me called in to treat a grievously sick woman!

The prez, cheeks red after hearing the butler's entreaty, said, "I—I don't know if it will work, but if her doctors have given their permission, we should make an attempt. Issei's techniques have brought about miracles before, so there's always a chance. Please use it on Aunt Misra, Issei."

I-if the prez was willing to go this far, I couldn't refuse her.

"Please, I beg of you!" the butler added, bowing deeply.

R-right! Okay, then! Let's give it a shot!

"I understand. I can't guarantee anything, but I'll do my best!"

I activated my gauntlet and began charging my power to use my breast translation technique.

"Boost!"

Once a certain amount of energy had built up inside my Sacred Gear, I paused the charging process and activated my ability.

"Boob-Lingual!"

A mysterious field spread through the room, centered on me! I called out to Lady Misra.

"Sairaorg's mother, please answer me! H-how are you feeling?!"

It was such a senseless thing to ask.

"..."

Her breasts didn't say anything in response.

No effect. Did I fail? Hmm...

No! I refused to give up until I'd tried everything!

"I'll activate my armor and then ask her again!"

The charging time necessary to manifest my armor had been reduced significantly following the battle in Kyoto, so I triggered it now. *My apologies for doing something so dangerous in a hospital! Please forgive me, hardworking medical staff members!* This was all for Sairaorg's mother!

As the prez and the butler watched, I poured my Red Dragon Emperor power into my mind to increase the potency of my abilities.

"Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!"

"Breasts of Sairaorg's mother... Please speak to me!"

My Red Dragon Emperor aura washed over Lady Misra, asleep on her hospital bed.

I increased my energy output and tried asking again, and yet...

“...”

As I'd feared, her breasts didn't say anything in response. The technique should have been perfect. Maybe boobs couldn't answer if they were unconscious due to illness...?

“What are you all doing?” questioned someone new.

The prez and I turned around, only to lay eyes on a man with short black hair, purple eyes, and a powerful physique—Sairaorg!

“I see. I'm sorry.”

After hearing what we were doing in his mother's hospital room, Sairaorg thanked the prez and me, giving us a faint smile.

It was no use talking in the hospital room, so we had made our way to the rest floor. I had deactivated my armor, of course. I couldn't afford to walk around in a hospital dressed in a full suit of armor.

I could hardly believe I was being thanked for using Boob-Lingual on a comatose woman... Describing how this situation made me feel was beyond my ability!

“I'm sorry. I told Issei about your mother and you, and right before our match. And after all that, we weren't even able to help...”

The prez looked genuinely remorseful. She probably thought she'd needlessly involved me in Sairaorg's personal affairs.

Perhaps the prez feared this would make it harder for me to fight Sairaorg when the time came?

“I don't mind. I'm glad you tried, and I'm sure my mother is as well. The House of Bael's conflicts are common among the Seventy-Two Pillars, especially when it comes to deciding the next family head. The culprit just so happens to be one of the higher-ranking families this time.”

Sairaorg spoke as though the events of his own past were of no great importance.

To me, what his family had done seemed beyond cruel, and Sairaorg came across as all the more incredible for having overcome their abuse.

As stupid as I was, even I recognized that his life's experiences couldn't possibly be summed up so easily.

"I'm indebted to the Houses of Sitri and Gremory. I can't thank you enough," Sairaorg said.

"It's okay. Really, it's the least we can do," the prez replied.

As an observer, it seemed like an everyday conversation between two cousins.

Perhaps this casual exchange was only possible because Sairaorg was now the heir to the House of Bael? I had to wonder.

Suddenly, his expression turned stern. "Remember that our match is a separate matter. *My* team will be the one to win our Rating Game. So throw away any feelings of pity, because I don't want your sympathy to hold you back. I desire to fight the Gremory Familia at its best." Sairaorg looked positively dauntless!

He averted his gaze, staring down at his clenched fists. "All I have is this body. So if I lose, everything I've worked to achieve, all my accomplishments, will be forfeit. Having failed to inherit my family's power of destruction, my only path forward is through victory. I have no choice but to triumph with these fists."

He glanced at the prez and me, a fiery spirit burning in his eyes. "It might not be particularly cool or flashy, but clumsy as it is, that's how I intend to face you."

I gulped but decided to meet his challenge head-on. "I won't hold back. Whatever you went through in the past has nothing to do with our upcoming battle. Besides, I doubt I'll win if I go easy on you out of sympathy. I'll do everything I can to come out on top!"

Those were my honest feelings.

Sairaorg's story was tragic, but all of that was left behind in a Rating Game.

Besides, there was no shortage of tragic pasts among the members of the Gremory Familia. Sairaorg's Familia was undoubtedly composed of people who fought for many different reasons, too. What mattered was that we each had a

goal to keep striving for.

“My dream is to become a high-class demon and the mightiest of Pawns! And to do that, I need to defeat you, Sairaorg! To make my own ambitions a reality!”

At my declaration, Sairaorg broke into a satisfied grin. “Good. Yes, that will do just fine. You learned something in Kyoto, didn’t you? I can see it in your eyes. You’re more confident now—stronger.”

Uh-oh. I’d let myself get carried away. It wasn’t good to let an opponent scrutinize me like this before our match.

Sairaorg was one of very few opponents who acknowledged my abilities, and it looked like I’d unknowingly let my aura flare up in response to his anticipation.

“Rias, Issei Hyoudou—let’s fight for our dreams and ambitions,” Sairaorg said.

“Yes. I won’t lose,” the prez answered boldly.

After that, the prez and I bid Sairaorg and the butler farewell and headed home. I felt bad for not being able to help, especially since the butler had expressly come to me... Then again, if my breast techniques were *that* effective, the doctors of the world would lose their jobs.

I sat deep in thought in the limousine, staring out the window at the passing forest scenery.

I couldn’t lose. And yet...I still hadn’t lasted to the end of a single Rating Game.

I’d suffered a miserable defeat against Riser Phenex and lost to Saji in the battle with the Sitri Familia. While I had numerous regular victories under my belt, I couldn’t help but feel...ashamed.

My dream was to become the mightiest of Pawns and a high-class demon. Plus, to secure victory for the prez, of course! That was what I had to do.

That meant I would definitely—

“You’re really starting to look like a full-grown man. And I...well, I...,” the prez whispered softly beside me.

“Huh? What did you say?” Despite my asking, the prez only smiled faintly.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought she looked a little sad.

Life.2

A Maiden's Heart Is Complicated

"Hmm. I guess the biggest bottleneck in any Triaina combo will be the Bishop role...", I said to Kiba during lunch break between bites of a rice ball.

We members of the Gremory Familia were busy practicing for our upcoming match in the vast fields of the Gremory territory.

Kiba and I had been engaged in a fierce practice bout and were now taking a breather.

In the distance, Rossweisse was busy training with Xenovia, while Gasper and Koneko were lending each other a hand. The prez and Akeno watched over all of us, offering helpful advice. Asia seemed to be discussing some form of holy incantation with Irina.

The Rating Game with Sairaorg was coming up fast, so all our available time was spent either on solo training or team practice. Practically every day involved preparing for the Academy Festival, then demon work, and finally, combat exercises.

"Yes. The issue with your Triaina Bishop is its charging time. So long as you time your actions properly, you should be able to deal considerable damage with your Knight and Rook roles. You could even force your opponent to lower their guard by altering the path of any blast after firing it," Kiba replied as he wiped the sweat from his face.

It was just as he said. Alone, each of my Triaina roles had obvious shortcomings. However, mock battles with Kiba, Xenovia, and Rossweisse had revealed new tactics.

Combined, my overwhelming speed, offensive power, and defensive capabilities made for the ultimate weapon if timed appropriately. I was also fortunate that I could switch between Triaina roles as much as I wanted without

needing the prez's approval.

The issue was the Bishop mode... Powering up that cannon was a real drawback.

If my opponent realized what I was doing, there was no way they'd kindly wait until I was ready. And that long charging time really limited the possibilities.

At the tail end of our battle in Kyoto, I'd hit upon the idea to bend an energy blast after firing it. It was easier said than done, though. Pulling it off consistently, even in my Triaina Bishop form, would require considerable training.

"In a team battle, it's also necessary to work hand in hand with the other members. Xenovia and I will form the vanguard, while you, Issei, will take the rear and charge your cannon. When you're ready, you'll need to act immediately. There won't be many members of the Bael Familia who will be able to survive a direct hit from that insane bombardment."

Cooperation would be a must. Letting my friends buy me time to unleash my attack safely was definitely a better option.

"By the way, how much does it drain you?" Kiba inquired.

He was referring to the strain my Triaina ability put on my physical energy and stamina.

"Hmm. I think I can last a bit longer than I could at first, but it's still nothing to sneeze at."

That was especially true when it came to any combo moves. Continuously Promoting left me exhausted before I knew what hit me. It'd be nice if I could use it two or three times...but I would have to save that trick up my sleeve for a direct encounter with Sairaorg. Asia's Sacred Gear mended any physical injuries, but it did nothing for my depleted stamina. I'd only get one shot. If I ran out of strength... If I couldn't maintain my Scale Mail...

"It's a team battle, so I'll have your back when you need it. I've developed a new technique of my own, after all," Kiba said, beaming with confidence.

Right, he'd shown it to me earlier! He was still keeping it under wraps, but it was incredible! Facing off against it had certainly made for good training!

That was Kiba for you! He'd used his defeat in Kyoto to spur him on to new heights!

"U-ummm, I just thought of something..."

Ravel, who had come to observe our training, must have overheard our conversation, as she raised her hand to offer a comment. "It's about that specialized Bishop Promotion you mentioned... Instead of firing that cannon blast yourself, couldn't you transfer the energy to someone else? You would have a much wider attack range if you did that."

...

At this suggestion, Kiba and I were both rendered temporarily speechless...

"“That's a great idea!”" we both cried at the same moment, nodding in excitement!

She was right! I probably *could* do that! Bishops were essentially support pieces, after all! It stood to reason that I could transfer that tremendous accumulation of energy to someone else to use!

"If that's possible, we'll have a much wider selection of tactics at our disposal," Kiba noted. "Even if the other side realizes you're readying your shot, if you transfer that power to someone else, we might be able to catch them unprepared."

"Do you think we can trick them? Make them wonder whether I mean to shoot or pass?"

"Yes. That should shake their confidence considerably. If you can transmit to one of us over a long distance, it could prove to be a very useful team ability. Also, you have two cannons, so if, like your usual transfer technique, you can divide it between two recipients, you should be able to assist the vanguard considerably. We'll have to plan our strategy properly, but this should be an interesting experiment."

"Whoa! Whooooaaaaa! Awesome! With this, I'll actually be super helpful in a

team battle! Heck, in real-life fights, too!”

Ravel sure had struck on an interesting idea! Maybe she was a natural strategist? I would need a good tactician of my own for my future Familia, and this was precisely what I was looking for! With my brains, I’d be a complete dolt of a King, so a little intellectual backup was necessary.

I was getting totally carried away in excitement.

“The problem, I think, will be the field. It would be good if it’s amenable to team battles, however...” With the practice bout between Xenovia and Rossweisse finished, the prez had approached to give insight.

Xenovia and Rossweisse were both lying prone on the ground. Theirs had been a fierce contest, and the sounds of combat had been going for some time... They were surely both exhausted.

“Sairaorg told those organizing the match that he would let us fight with everything we have, and they’ve agreed to it,” the prez explained. “As such, there are no restraints on our activities, making this a different sort of Rating Game than our one against the Sitri Familia. However, there *is* a special rule this time.”

“A s-special rule...?” I repeated.

The prez nodded. “The venue will be an aerial city floating over the territory belonging to Archduke Agares. The organizers are hoping to attract a large audience, and it seems they don’t anticipate a long battle.”

Hold on, so there are floating cities in the underworld? If that was true, it really was no different than a fantasy realm.

And the match would be spectated by a large audience... In that case, they probably weren’t expecting it to last several days, as was sometimes the case with Rating Games.

So it would be a blitz-style fight—a short, decisive skirmish? If the organizers were hoping to please a crowd, that would certainly be the way to keep them excited.

Watching me ponder this new development, the prez flashed a forced smile.

“Rating Games are a form of entertainment, so they’re partly designed to please fans.”

“They may be young, but in the underworld, Rias Gremory’s and Sairaorg Bael’s Familias are just as popular as full-on professional teams,” Ravel added. “Your matches are already getting a lot of attention. They mention you on TV almost every day.”

Knowing that, it certainly did sound like a small battlefield would help to keep the fans on their toes...

Hmm. I was a demon now, so I would have to keep this aspect of the Rating Game in mind. It really was different from genuine combat. It was entertainment. Being the Breast Dragon, maybe I could help add to the audience’s thrill...? I had to imagine a lot of children would be coming to watch, too...

Whatever the arena, this contest against Sairaorg wouldn’t be an easy one, and I sincerely doubted it would go entirely according to plan.

For now, our only choice was to dedicate ourselves to our training and remain confident in our prospects of victory. I definitely had to try out Ravel’s idea later.

“Thanks, Ravel. That’s good advice,” I said.

Immediately, her face turned scarlet, and she responded almost standoffishly.

“N-not at all! I would be embarrassed if someone I owed a favor to lost such an important match!”

A couple of days ago, she had moved into the Hyoudou residence with the rest of us.

She’d been reared as a real-life princess, but because of that, there were a lot of everyday things she didn’t know how to do for herself, such as eating with chopsticks or using a washing machine. As such, I’d been keeping her company and teaching her how to look after herself.

At such times, she would inevitably get into a fight with Koneko. The two of them, it seemed, didn’t quite get along.

Whenever they bumped into each other in the hallway, they'd turn away with an audible ““Hmph!””

Were cats and birds just natural enemies?

Heck, I had never seen Koneko act this way before. Still, as far as I could tell, the two didn't seem to truly despise each other... Did they enjoy fighting, maybe...?

For now, I supposed I could let them be.

I rose to my feet and said, “All right, Kiba. Let's see if I can actually pull off this power-transferring idea!”

I was all fired up and ready to get back to practice. Unfortunately...

“That will be enough for today,” the prez said, stopping me. “We have a press conference tomorrow. If you keep this up much longer, you won't be in a state to appear before the media.”

A-a press conference...?

I blinked in surprise. A press conference...

I must have been making a dumb face, as the prez broke into a slight grin. “Oh? Didn't I tell you? Our team and Sairaorg's are supposed to meet the media before the match. We'll be on live television, so don't make any funny faces, okay?”

“Wh-whaaaaaat?!”

I couldn't hide my shock. This was the first I'd heard of this!



The following night, after finishing our preparations for the Academy Festival at school, we made our way to a luxury hotel in the Gremory territory.

We were gathered in a waiting room on the top floor of the building. It was a huge space, filled with expensive-looking furniture. The tables were lined with platters of fruit, cakes, and sweets I had never seen before.

It was a skyscraper! And so luxurious! Later tonight, our press conference would be held in the hall on the second floor of the building.

The topic was simple enough—a pre-game media interview.

The prez and Sairaorg would be the main focus. Oh, and I was going to answer some questions, too! After all, I was the Breast Dragon!

B-but what was I supposed to say?! I didn't even know what the questions would be!

Do you have any words for all the beautiful ladies of the underworld?

Would a reporter ask me something like that...?! Probably not. No doubt Kiba and Sairaorg would be the ones to get that kind of question. Damn those pretty boys, free to send out suave messages to the demon women of the underworld!

I was sitting on the sofa, trying to get my thoughts in order, when Koneko plopped down on my lap, digging into a piece of cake!

She sure had guts, doing that at a time like this!

Asia and Rossweisse were sitting in front of a wide mirror with the makeup artists, desperately touching up their faces.

“How about this?”

“Does it suit me? No?”

Xenovia looked calm enough, having only applied a light coat of makeup.

The prez and Akeno were both all set. We were supposed to wear our school uniforms for the press conference, but perhaps owing to their makeup, they both looked particularly glamorous, even in that everyday attire.

They really were gorgeous, my Two Great Ladies. However, this wasn't the time to be besotted with them! I had to relax my nerves!

“Are you sure you want to wear a girl's uniform, Gasper?” I heard Kiba ask.

“Y-yes,” Gasper responded. “It would feel strange to dress like a boy now... But more importantly, I don't want to *gooooo*! I'm a shut-in! I'll be too out of place in front of the cameras!”

Those two looked about as ready as they'd ever be.

Just don't go hide in a cardboard box, Gasper...

Speaking of Kiba...and transferring the energy from my Triaina cannons... I couldn't resist the temptation to experiment with it this morning, and it was tough!

Perhaps because all that gathered power was supposed to be used for attack, it was extremely challenging to convert it for transfer. The very idea of firing something other than demonic power from those cannons was insane.

Still, it shouldn't have been impossible. No, it definitely *was* possible. I knew I wouldn't be able to pull it off by tomorrow, though. If I could, it would have made a handy support ability for the others...

At the moment, the only way I could transfer my power was through physical contact. Ravel's idea was still a good one and worth working toward, though.

At present, however, it would be faster for me to change to my Triaina Knight role to transfer my boosted powers by touch.

Did that mean I was better suited to outright attack and employing erotic tactics?

"You've always emphasized attack. Although among my previous hosts, there were those who specialized in transferring their energy..."

Seriously, Ddraig? How did they fight by focusing on transferring their powers?

"They would do it in a number of ways to increase the potency of their effects. One was a summoner and would send their power to the creatures they called to fight. That afforded them a great many battle options."

Huh. So there were guys like that among my predecessors? I was completely talentless when it came to demonic powers, so it sounded like that summoner person had the exact opposite fighting style to me.

Wizard-type Red Dragon Emperors! Who would've thought such a thing actually existed?

But this wasn't the time to be pondering that! We were about to step out in front of the cameras! The clock was ticking!

I—I should probably check myself over in the mirror one last time...

Unfortunately, I was trapped beneath Koneko, who still hadn't moved from my lap. She'd been following me around all day, constantly tugging at my sleeves, seemingly more attached to me than usual...

Perhaps she caught me wondering about her behavior, as her cheeks turned faintly pink.

"...That roast chicken isn't here today, so I wanted to sit on your lap."

Akeno, overhearing this, gave us both a smile. "Oh dear. Is our sweet little Koneko afraid Ravel will steal Issei away from her?"

Koneko's face reddened further.

"I-is that right...?" I asked timidly.

Koneko pursed her lips. "...You're too kind, Issei. It gets you into trouble."

I—I didn't know what she meant by that, but maybe she was unhappy with how much time I'd spent with Ravel lately? Was she afraid of being replaced as my underclassman?

What a shock! To think that a first-year girl had become so dependent on me!

"I think you're adorable, Koneko, so don't worry," I assured her, but that did little to improve her mood.

Her expression remained unchanged, but her tail was wagging, so maybe I *had* succeeded in comforting her a little?

The prez was also watching over our exchange. "Yes... Issei does tend to be overly nice with people. For my part... No, never mind," she whispered.

I couldn't help but feel vaguely suspicious by how sullen she abruptly became. Her eyes looked a little sad...

Hmm. There was definitely something up with her. Had something happened?

At that moment, the door leading into the waiting room swung open. It was a member of the staff.

"It's almost time, everyone," they called.

It looked like the press conference was about to begin! I was so nervous!

As we proceeded down the corridor, we bumped into a familiar face.

“Ah! If it isn’t Rias, Hyoudou, and everyone from the Occult Research Club!”

It was Saji! What was *he* doing here?!

“Saji! What have you done now?!”

The person in question merely shrugged his shoulders. What was with that response?

“You’re one to talk... Well, I guess it can’t be helped. Our next Rating Game has been decided, but it isn’t getting all that much attention.” He let out a sigh. “Our Rating Game will be against Agares. We’re here for a press meeting, too.”

...

“Wh-whaaaaaaaaaat?! Why didn’t anyone tell me?!”

What was going on?! Seriously, this was my first time hearing about it!

Seeing me all flustered, the prez tilted her head to one side. “Didn’t I mention it? Sona’s match against Seekvaira Agares will be at the same time as ours. It will also be held in the Agares territory. I think the venue is a group of floating islands over a large lake.”

She *definitely* hadn’t mentioned it! First the press conference, now this?! Was the prez making a habit of not notifying me of things in advance?! Maybe it had simply slipped her mind, what with how busy we were preparing for the Academy Festival and the upcoming match.

Saji laughed. “Didn’t you hear me? No one’s paying any attention to us. I mean, *your* battle features the famous Gremory Familia, the Breast Dragon, and the number one demon youth Sairaorg Bael and his group.”

Ugh. Sorry, Saji. If I’d known, maybe we could have given each other a pep talk. Undoubtedly, he was super busy with everything the student council had to do before the Academy Festival.

“Come on, Gen. We can’t be late. Best of luck, Rias,” said Hanakai, a Bishop in the Sitri Familia.

“Ah, right. Well then, we’ll be off,” Saji remarked.

“Good luck. Give Sona my regards,” the prez responded.

Saji bowed his head before hurrying away.

So the Sitri Familia’s Rating Game was taking place soon, too, and their opponent was Seekvaira of the archducal House of Agares. They were up against that cool, poised, and absolutely terrifying beauty?

I’d heard that she was every bit the strategist that Chairwoman Sona was. It would be a true battle of wits...and could quite possibly end up being a total stall-out situation.

After our brief chat with Saji, we continued down the corridor until we reached the hall for our press interview.

“Here they are—the Gremory Familia is making their entrance now.”

We stepped into the spacious hall to a round of applause.

That very moment, I felt suddenly tense and nervous. Everyone in the room seemed to be emanating fighting spirit.

Whoa... There were so many people! Probably reporters and their assistants and the like. They were all staring at us and snapping pictures!

Hanging behind the stage at the front of the room was a large banner: SAIRAORG BAEI VS RIAS GREMORY. The members of Sairaorg’s Familia had already taken their seats.

After a brief pause to get our bearings, we took our chairs beside the Bael group. The prez sat in the middle, with Akeno on her right and me on her left, positioned so that we would be the center of attention.

On the Bael side, everyone looked to be fired up and ready to go, especially Sairaorg. No sooner had I entered the room than I sensed his eagerness for the battle to get underway.

His expression was serious, completely different from when we’d met at the hospital... Maybe this press conference would serve as the opening salvo...?

From the second row behind us, Gasper’s eyes were wide open, as though he was desperately trying to conceal his self-consciousness.

Hang in there, shut-in vampire! This is the moment of truth!

“Now that everyone has arrived, I would like to start the press interview,” came a voice over the speaker system—the lead journalist.

With that, the press conference got underway.

The lead interviewer began by introducing the basic details of the upcoming match—location, time, the two Kings, and so forth. This prompted enthusiastic responses for both the prez and Sairaorg.

Both team leaders maintained dignified appearances throughout.

I sat quietly while my master and fellow Familia members answered the questions posed to them. Even the slightest movement risked catching the reporters’ attention.

I had to remain calm.

My hands grew sweaty, but thankfully, the first portion of the media event went off without a hitch. Now it was time for the various members of both sides to field individual queries.

My female teammates, who had large male fan bases in the underworld, answered a few questions, while Kiba, popular among women, had no difficulty responding to his.

Finally, it was my turn!

“I have one for Issei Hyoudou, the Breast Dragon currently soaring in popularity throughout the underworld.”

“O-okay,” I answered.

Wh-what were they going to ask me? About my preferences in women? Or my thoughts about the match? My head was practically spinning.

“Will you be poking Lady Rias’s breasts again this time? If so, what kind of situation do you envision?”

...

That inquiry came so far out of left field that my mind went completely blank for a moment.

“...U-ummm...”

I had to be pulling a stupid face, yet the journalist pressed the issue anyway. “Reports say you can power up by touching Lady Rias’s breasts, just like in your TV program. Rumor has it you’ve been able to overcome countless crises thanks to that ability.”

What an awful question! Demons from all over knew I could boost my strength with boobs?! Was *that* my public image?! The worst thing about it was that it was completely true!

Shocked though I was, I had to say *something*.

“Um, well, you see, th-th-the pre—er, ouch...”

I was so nervous that I had almost said *prez*. It wouldn’t do to call her that in public.

She was my master, and I was supposed to address her properly! I must have mumbled my words, as the reporter seemed to hear something else...

“‘Squirch’?! Did you just say ‘squirch’?! Are you suggesting you plan to *squirch* her breasts—to suck on them?!”

A bombardment of camera flashes struck me, and the mass of journalists erupted into a bustling commotion!

Wh-wh-wh-wh-whaaaaaaaat?! They misunderstood me! Those damn reporters! Nnnnnngggghhhhhh!

Not *squirch*! How could they believe I’d said *that*?!

The situation was rapidly spiraling out of control!

“Does that mean you’ll be sucking on Lady Rias’s breasts?!”

No! I wasn’t about to declare something like that in front of all these people!

“If touching breasts helps you to power up, what happens when you suck on them?! Will that unleash power enough to destroy the entire underworld?!”

As if I knew! Did they think I was some breast dark lord, capable of annihilating the world by sucking on tits?!

“Lady Rias! Please, do you have a comment?!”

Now they were directing their attention at the prez! She was covering her face with her hands, but there was no mistaking that it had turned a deep crimson in color.

“...I—I don’t know!”

My thoughts exactly!

Akeno was barely holding in her laughter.

Fine! Laugh all you want! See if I care!

“Sairaorg! What are your thoughts?”

That damn reporter! Don’t ask him! Aghhhhhh!

Sairaorg, his expression entirely serious, responded, “Hmm. I suspect if he sucked on a woman’s breasts, the Red Dragon Emperor would become terrifyingly powerful.”

““““Oooooohhhhh!””””

The journalists went wild at that! Saaaaaiiiiraaaaaooooorg! Why did you have to go and say something so stupid?!

And just like that, the tense atmosphere hanging over the press conference was shattered, and a curtain of laughter fell over the event.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

After the press conference, the Gremory and Bael Familias came together at the back of the conference hall. Sairaorg was bellowing with mirth.

“You know, it’s never a dull moment with the Gremory Familia. I went into the interview ready for battle, but now I feel completely refreshed! Yes, relaxed, even!”

“Ngh! You didn’t need to say anything so *weird*, Sairaorg!” the prez cried. Her face was scarlet, and tears shone in the corners of her eyes.

She was clearly embarrassed by what had happened...

S-sorry, Prez... I never meant for this to happen...

“I suppose it’s all right. Thanks to you, we ended up with a newsworthy press

conference instead of a bloodthirsty one. I can't wait to see the headlines in the morning papers tomorrow."

I wish I shared that sentiment! I could already imagine the titles: BREAST DRAGON PLANNING TO SQUIRCH! If anything like that got printed, I would never be able to face the prez's family again!

Sairaorg, still grinning, let out a deep exhale. "I see. So this is what it means to fight the Red Dragon Emperor—no, the Breast Dragon. I never thought we would end up competing for press coverage, too."



“S-sorry... I didn’t intend to make fools of everyone...,” I apologized.

Sairaorg shook his head. “Not at all. I don’t mind. Quite the opposite, in fact. I can sense some unknown power from your presence. Causing such a ruckus at a high-profile venue confirms my feeling.”

Sairaorg was typically so stern. So earnest. Yet he’d let his playful side show during the interview.

Soon, we’d be meeting this friendly figure on the battlefield. All for the sake of our dreams and aspirations.

With that, Sairaorg spun around, departing with a wave. “I had fun tonight. Our next reunion will be our decisive battle. Let’s meet again...in the skies above.”

Right. Our next encounter would be during the Rating Game...

At least we’d survived the press conference, although that meant even less time until our match.

...I won’t lose!



“Ah, the newspapers tomorrow are going to be a nightmare!” I muttered as I took a soak in the large bathing area beneath the Hyoudou residence.

After the media event, we’d made our way home, returning to our normal routines.

I couldn’t shake the embarrassment. It was so intense that I wanted to die on the spot. I’d hoped a bath would improve my mood.

By the way, the new bathing area at my house was immense! It had been installed during the recent large-scale renovation. It was so huge that twenty people could fit in it comfortably. Of course, there was still a regular-size bathtub up on the first floor.

From what I gathered, the girls seemed to enjoy coming here to wash as a group.

My parents were also allowed to use this area, but my mom had ordered my dad only to use the bath on the first floor.

Naturally, her reason was that we had so many young women staying in our house. My dad didn't want to cause an international incident, so he'd agreed. It wasn't all bad for him, though. He essentially had a tub entirely to himself now. A private bath sure sounded nice.

My mom had instructed me not to use the large basement tub as well, but I still liked to slip in whenever I had the chance.

What I would've given to find myself caught in a lucky pervert situation where the girls showed up!

The bath was incredible, and I wanted to put it to full use. That said, there was no sign that anyone was coming to join me today.

Sadly, even a soak in warm water wasn't enough to repair my mood. Perhaps that was because the match was coming up fast or because my mental state seemed to be getting pushed to new extremes practically every day.

Still, our dreams were on the line. I had to give the Rating Game my all.

All right then, maybe I'll try the sauna!

Yep, this grandiose bathroom also came complete with a steam room! The House of Gremory truly possessed inconceivable wealth! It was always best to be prepared for a rainy day!

I stepped into the steam room and sat there in a daze for around ten minutes.

My body positively oozed sweat. Perhaps another rinse after this to refresh myself was in order? Snatching a glass of cold coffee-flavored milk on the way out was in order, too.

Just as I was about to leave the sauna...

...the door slid open, and the prez entered, fully nude.

Wait, whaaaaaaaaaat?!

"Oh, Issei."

She stood before me, fully naked without so much as a bath towel! Even knowing I was in here, she made no attempt to cover herself! How could she be so daring?!

“U-um! I—I...!”

I covered my privates with my hands, skirting toward the door in an attempt to slip out. However, the prez grabbed ahold of my hand to stop me.

“Don’t worry. Keep me company for a little while.”

Was this really okay?! I would end up feasting my eyes on her flesh! If she was cool with it, then... Thank you! Don’t mind if I do!

I sat down beside the prez and let my eyes roam over her irresistible body. I couldn’t be sure whether she’d already taken a soak or had merely washed her body before entering the sauna, but her long crimson hair was wet, and it clung to her skin in a way that only added to her sensual luster!

She gracefully brushed her locks to one side with a hand as she crossed her legs. I couldn’t help but swallow in anticipation.

We were alone, just the two of us, in a private room! My body was already overheated from the sauna, and now I could feel the flames of desire burning from deep inside me! Uh-oh! If I was worth anything as a man, I would’ve taken her in my arms right there!

“It’s just you and me, Issei. What do you think would happen if you pushed me down on the bench?”

Why did she have to come out swinging with something so tantalizingly obscene?! Please cut me some slack! Seriously, I could barely control myself in this situation already!

“But you must be used to seeing me naked, so perhaps this isn’t enough to drive you that far. What do you think, Issei?”

“N-not at all! Your body is incredible!”

This wasn’t an unusual kind of exchange for us. The prez teased me, and I answered. She loved seeing me act all shy and bashful!

It was different this time, though.

She took my hand and placed it right....o-o-on her chest!

H-her flesh was dripping with sweat, and that voluptuous, delectable feeling

stimulated my nerves like nothing else!

And then she whispered tantalizingly, “If that’s how you feel, then do it now...”

Her voice was slightly melancholic, and her skin was tinged pink. I could sense a fiery determination burning within her.

...

...

H-h-h-h-hold on here! She wants me to take her?! S-s-seriously?! Here?! Now?! Me?! Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?!

I was left utterly dumbfounded.

“Hey, Issei... What am I...to you?”

“You’re the prez! Nothing more, nothing less!”

Right! In my mind, she was my one and only prez! Yet after I said this, I felt like I could hear her grinding her teeth.

At that moment, the prez took my hand and squeezed it tightly.

“...In that case...I would like to be more...”

Bah!

With that, she leaned in toward me, and...

She was pushing me down right where I sat, all but falling over me! The glorious texture of her soft, feminine skin assaulted my senses! My arms, chest, stomach, legs—everything was being covered by her supple skin! A-and her breasts were pushing up so tightly against my chest, so taut and elastic...! There could be no mistaking those points of pressure...they had to be her nipples!

M-my brain was practically at a boil! The woman I loved had pushed me down in a private sauna! She was practically lying atop of me!

Could it be?! Was this it?! After everything, was it finally here?!

My first time?!

What more could I possibly wish for than for my initial experience to be with

the prez?! There was no greater happiness!

I lay there in bewilderment, unsure what to do with my hands. Where was I supposed to put them?! I'd never done this before! Should I reach for her butt?! Her thighs?! Or were her breasts the right call?!

With her lying directly on top of me, I felt her heartbeat coursing through my own body, too! I was so nervous that my heart was pounding, b-but was she just as anxious?

"Let me feel you...," she said as our lips overlapped.

A kiss!

This... This was bad!

Our tongues were practically entangled! I felt as though my brain could melt! She was sucking my tongue into her mouth...!

Muah...

Obscene sounds echoed throughout the sauna, sending an unknown feeling racing through my body. Every time I tasted the prez's saliva, it felt like sparks might come flying out of my eyes!

Uh-oh! I was completely turned on now! A wave of damp red hair came falling down on my face. The fragrant scent of the prez's shampoo filled my nostrils with a resplendent flower garden! When her tongue left my mouth, a string of saliva joined us by the lips. We'd kissed before, but this was our most intense encounter yet...

I—I had to ready myself! Th-the prez was completely serious...! She was going to make love to me! My virginity would be lost in a sauna, the both of us drenched in sweat!

"P-Prez... I...!"

"Unbelievable!" I heard her mumble, and she suddenly stopped. "'Prez'...? You would still call me that...even when we're about to do this?"

She lifted herself up, her expression vacant. She'd seemed so seductive before, yet now her face was stripped of all emotion.

“What *am* I to you...?”

She pulled away.

I thought to follow...but the prez was shaking all over. She hurried toward the door.

Wh-what just happened?! Have I done something wrong?!

“Prez?” I called out. “What’s—?”

“Don’t follow me!” she cried back.

And just like that, she was gone.

Unsure what had gone awry, all I could do was stare down at the small tears left on the floor.



I found myself breathing a deep sigh after school the following day.

A newspaper from the underworld was clutched in my hands.

BREAST DRAGON TO “SQUIRCH” SWITCH PRINCESS?!

The headline was as terrible as I’d anticipated. I could feel a wave of dizziness coming on just reading it...

Nonetheless, that wasn’t my main concern. There was a more pressing issue at hand.

I’d offended the prez last night. After finishing up in the bathroom, I’d found a piece of paper stuck to my bedroom door reading NO ISSEIS! I hadn’t been able to step inside until this morning.

The prez and Asia had slept without me, while I’d been forced to take an empty room... It had been a lonely night.

A new day hadn’t done much to mend the prez’s mood, either. When she spoke to me this morning, her attitude had been perfunctory, and her usual smile was gone.

The girls had all realized something was amiss, everyone asking me if something had happened...

I could only answer that I wasn’t entirely sure, yet they all were convinced it

was my fault. And so now I was the bad guy.

Look, maybe I *was* in the wrong... But what exactly should I have done? I had no idea.

I'd heard that women preferred a romantic atmosphere on such occasions, so maybe that was it? I guess I didn't act the way I was supposed to...

But what was the *right* way?!

Suddenly, I remembered something the prez's mother had said to me recently. Maybe the answer to this problem lay there...? I had to assume my insane delusions were incorrect, though. Yeah, I was entirely off the mark.

What *did* the prez mean to me in my private life...? Venelana's words kept echoing inside my skull.

If ours wasn't a master-servant relationship...

An answer *did* come to mind, but it was so far-fetched as to seem no more than a wild fantasy...

Besides...what if I was simply misreading her behavior...?

Another memory came to mind...the fallen angel Raynare. The woman who had deceived me—my first girlfriend.

I couldn't stand that recollection.

Because of that experience, I couldn't follow through to the end... It had driven a wedge into the back of my mind... Even now, I hadn't gotten over it.

I wanted to get to know the girls in the Gremory Familia more, to take our bonds to the next level. Yet because of that incident, I always found myself faltering.

Dammit. I was so weak—pathetic, even. I could recognize the problem, but I couldn't overcome it. Still, I wanted nothing more than to share these feelings with the prez!

When would I finally be able to move forward...?

This would have to wait. We were about to have an important meeting with Azazel to discuss our strategy for the upcoming Rating Game.

Kiba and Gasper were already in the room with me. The others hadn't arrived yet. The Church Trio had gone back to the new school building a short time ago to pick up some fabric to use in our preparations for the Academy Festival.

The prez and Akeno were absent, too. For now, it was just the guys.

I decided to try starting a conversation. "Yo, Gasper. How are Koneko and Ravel doing in class?"

"A-ah... The two of them are always arguing... Koneko is usually so quiet, but she's merciless with her criticisms around Ravel..."

So nothing new, then?

"K-Koneko might complain, but since Ravel's new to life in the human world, she's always looking out for her... And I guess Ravel frequently hangs around Koneko, despite her rebukes..."

In a way, the two of them seemed to be getting along reasonably well, by the sound of it.

"Hmm. Yep, I don't get it. A maiden's heart sure is complicated..." I stared up at the ceiling.

"They've likely both realized they have feelings for the same guy. That's why they always end up butting heads. And they're in the same class, which exacerbates the issue," Azazel said as he entered the room, staring down at me probingly.

"Wh-what's up, Teach?"

"Koneko's doing as you asked and looking out for Ravel. And Ravel's relying on Koneko as she adjusts to her new life."

"Ah... So it's working out, then?" I answered weakly.

"I—I don't think I can be helpful to Ravel the way Koneko is... I—I wish I could be of some use to everyone. In private, and in battle, too... But I'm so useless..." Gasper said gloomily.

"What are you talking about?" I replied. "You're allowed to use your eyes this time around, and you're even carrying a vial of my blood on you. What's there to worry about?"

“I’m not brave or strong like you are, Issei... And I can’t wield a sword like Yuuto... I’d be happy if I could at least offer decent support, but... A-as a man, I—I’m ashamed of myself!”

So Gasper wanted to be an asset to the Familia, like Kiba and me. He might have had a penchant for dressing like a girl, but he was still a man at heart.

All right, then! Maybe I can give him a few pointers!

“Gasper! Take what I’m about to say to heart! This is lesson one of being a man in the Gremory Familia! *Men need to protect women!* Repeat after me!”

“M-men need to protect women!”

“Good! Next, lesson two! *A man needs to always find his feet!*”

“A—a man needs to always find his feet!”

“That’s it! Finally, lesson three! *Whatever happens, don’t give up!*”

“Wh-whatever happens, don’t give up!”

“Excellent! Engrave those words into your heart and do us men of the Gremory Familia proud!”

“O-okay! I—I’ll burn those lessons into my memoryyyyyy!”

Whoa, he was getting really fired up.

Kiba chuckled. “I like that. I’ll have to remember those tenets, too.”

“You’d better. No matter what happens, we guys of the Gremory Familia can’t give up.”

“Sounds like a pain in the ass,” Azazel muttered, having watched our exchange from the sidelines.

While we boys worked ourselves up, the prez and the others arrived.

I stole a glance at her, and while she clearly noticed, her expression remained blank and unreadable.

She was still angry... What would I do if she kept hating me?

I felt like despairing.

Azazel cast his gaze over us as we gathered around. “Right, then. Let’s get this

meeting started.”

With a stern look, Azazel said, “Before we talk about the match, we’d better go over the situation with all the different forces. There’s gonna be a little trouble with the Sacred Gear system.”

“What do you mean?” Kiba asked.

“You already know how the Hero Faction has been studying Sacred Gears and their Balance Breakers,” Azazel continued. “You’ve seen what they’ve been able to pull off firsthand.”

Yep. We certainly had. Back in Kyoto, the Hero Faction displayed some scary knowledge of Sacred Gears and their unique characteristics. However, their insights were the polar opposite of Azazel’s. They kept trying to push their Sacred Gears to boundaries that were supposed to be, for a good reason, off-limits.

“Word has it they’ve started teaching regular humans who don’t belong to their little Hero Faction and reincarnated demons how to unlock their own Balance Breakers.”

Regular humans...? Reincarnated demons...? They were instructing them?

Th-that sounded pretty bad... Balance Breakers possessed enormous power, after all.

Seeing my reaction, Azazel nodded. “As for the results, well, you can probably imagine how a downtrodden person’s values might change if they suddenly received powers strong enough to upset the balance of society. As you know, many people with Sacred Gears haven’t exactly been dealt good hands in life. It isn’t rare for them to suffer persecution and discrimination because of their differences. Plus, lots of folks are reincarnated as demon servants because of some unfair pact.”

The prez cut in there. “Not all demons have others’ best interests in mind... There are more than a few heartless high-ranking demons out there. There may be more open-minded demons today, but we’re ultimately methodical, pragmatic beings at heart.”

In other words, there were those with Sacred Gears who had been

reincarnated as demons against their will... And now they had Balance Breakers...

“Yeah, there’s plenty of Sacred Gear vessels who’ve endured a lot of hardship,” Azazel said. “So what will they do once they get their hands on an overwhelming level of power?”

Silence fell over the room.

Azazel’s expression clouded over. “They’ll use them. Regular humans with those kinds of abilities might be spurred to seek revenge on anyone who wrongs them, while those reincarnated as demons could end up lashing out against their masters.”

That would be disastrous.

There would be riots and unrest all throughout the human realm and the underworld! And the instigators would be wielding Balance Breakers! There were plenty of people armed with Sacred Gears who were unhappy with their lots in life.

“...That’s a scary thought,” I commented.

Azazel nodded. “Yeah, in a lot of ways. The Hero Faction’s obsessed with pushing the limits of human potential, studying Balance Breakers, and testing the mettle of supernatural beings. Any and all consequences will be viewed as achievements. It will only be a matter of time before some disgruntled Sacred Gear vessel causes havoc here or in the underworld.”

The seeds sowed by the Hero Faction were already spreading deep roots...

Azazel’s expression turned fearful, a rarity for him. “We’ve been had. We still don’t know what those terrorists’ endgame is, but it’s clear they’ve dealt us a heavy blow. There’s no mistaking this will have a big impact on things going forward. Yep, humans sure are terrifying in nature...”

Incidents could erupt soon and even affect high-class demons. At least the prez was a kind master, and those of us in her Familia who possessed Sacred Gears—Asia, Kiba, Gasper, and I—were living happy lives.

However, I understood that not everyone was so fortunate. That shadow-

wielding assailant back in Kyoto had been one such example. His life had turned around once the Hero Faction had taught him to master his abilities. Plenty would use their powers for the promise of a new and better existence.

It sounded like there would be lots of trouble from here on out...

I wanted to call out to the biblical God, who was supposedly dead. *Why did you create the Sacred Gear system? What were you thinking? Were you trying to save humans? Was it to help those in need? To create heroes and peerless warriors?*

Because if your plan was to improve people's lives, it isn't really working out.

Your little system is causing violence and unrest all over the world. Thanks to you, some of us—myself included—can supposedly kill deities.

Would I have pursued chaos if I'd been presented with a different path?

I didn't want to consider the possibility...

Azazel must have recognized that the atmosphere in the room was grim, because he cleared his throat with a feigned cough. "Ah, my bad. Anyway, I'm here to advise on your match against Sairaorg."

Right! This was supposed to be a key meeting! Our battle against the Bael Familia was near at hand! We needed whatever pointers he could give us!

Hoping to lighten the atmosphere, I raised my hand with a question. "Does Sairaorg have an adviser like you, Teach?"

Azazel was still serving as the Gremory Familia's adviser when it came to matches and the like. We were blessed indeed to have the leader of one of the Three Factions sharing his wisdom with us.

From what I gathered, he often assisted the Sitri Familia, too, and he seemed more than willing to share advice with anyone else who didn't pose us an immediate threat.

"You could say that," he answered. "The esteemed Emperor of the Rating Game, apparently."

"Diehauser Belial!" the prez exclaimed in shock.

Seeing as she hoped to one day claim every title relating to the Rating Game, he—the current champion—was her ultimate target.

Would he become an insurmountable obstacle for me when I was finally able to compete independently?

“Well, Rias, Issei, since you both aspire to compete as high-class demons, you’d better start thinking of him as the end boss. That goes for the rest of you, too. You won’t be able to avoid fighting him so long as your master is intent on climbing to the top,” Azazel said. “Now then, have you memorized that data on Sairaorg’s group?”

We all nodded.

Yeah, that had been no problem. We’d been researching the members of the Bael Familia. Although strictly speaking, we only knew about *some* of their abilities for certain. Knowledge was essential going into a battle like this. Without it, your enthusiasm could dry up in a heartbeat. Thus, I’d pored over the video recordings of Sairaorg’s match against Zephyrdor Glasya-Labolas!

Azazel activated a holographic projection in the center of the room, listing every member of the Bael Familia and their known skills and attributes.

“It looks like they didn’t show all their cards during their last bout,” he began. “Well, seeing how that Glasya-Labolas brat challenged Sairaorg to a one-on-one duel halfway in, that can’t really be helped. Sairaorg finished the match in no time.” He paused there for a moment, crossing his arms. “You know, Sairaorg and his people are a lot like you guys. They actually train for this sort of thing, unlike most demons. They’ve clearly leveled up from last time, too.”

Yep, Sairaorg’s Familia was hardworking and dedicated; a rarity among demons. Like us, its members worked daily to increase their strength... I had little doubt that they were stronger now than they had been during their previous match.

“Word has it they’ve even fought against the Khaos Brigade, so they’re building experience in real-life combat as well. Looks like Sirzechs’s desire to keep the demon youth away from danger was in vain. Sairaorg’s people are as reckless as you all, though, so they were always going to get involved,” Azazel remarked with a forced grin.

Seriously? All I wanted was to live in peace, but I'd already ended up facing off against a god and then did battle with the wielder of the ultimate Longinus. If only someone had told me my trip to Kyoto would end in an epic battle! Even if this was my fate, it was just too awful!

Rosswisse, her expression stern, spoke up. "The opposition's Pawn doesn't appear in the recordings, correct?"

We all glanced up at the projection, at a figure wearing what looked like some kind of science-fiction mask. In the name field, the data listed only the word *Pawn*.

Sairaorg's Pawn. His Familia also included one Queen, two Rooks, two Knights, and two Bishops. There was only the one masked Pawn, however.

"A reporter asked Sairaorg about his Pawn at the press conference, right?" Kiba asked.

Had there been a question like that? I must have been too nervous to notice.

I would have certainly remembered a mask like that if I'd seen it. In other words, the Pawn must have been absent from the media event.

"It seems Sairaorg rarely ever uses his Pawn. We've got hardly any information on him, and he's always masked, so we can't even tell who he really is. This latest match is the first time we've seen *any* details whatsoever. You can bet he'll be seeing action this time, though. Word is Sairaorg has been trying to keep his Pawn away from his other servants. Supposedly, this guy needed six or seven pieces to recruit. That's why the Bael Familia has only the one."

""""""""Six or seven?!""""""""" we cried out in collective shock.

Seven?! I myself had required eight pieces! If Sairaorg needed to use up that many to recruit this guy, he was either extremely skilled or possessed enormous potential!

"Since we don't have much data on him, we'd better be extremely wary," Azazel cautioned. "There's no telling what he's capable of... He's Sairaorg's ace in the hole, or as you say here in Japan, his prized tiger cub."

Tiger cub... Come to think of it, Sairaorg's mother came from a family said to rule over lions... Just trying to imagine what this potential foe could do sent a shiver down my spine. Would I be forced to fight him? No, I couldn't go in with that kind of attitude! I needed to use my brain and keep a cool head!

The prez took over the meeting from there, explaining our tactics and potential counterstrategies for each possible opponent.

Irina, who was sitting in on the meeting, watched with great interest. Ravel was present, too, hard at work taking notes. She sure was a studious one, huh?

At the end of our strategy discussion, I raised a hand into the air with a question for Azazel. "Teach. If we enter the Rating Game for real, what do you think our odds are of facing the reigning champion...?"

"The Gremory and Bael Familias are the most promising among the demon youths. Both are made up of powerful, highly capable members, even if you haven't participated in any official matches yet. More importantly, you have real-world combat experience from facing off against world-class foes, and on top of that, you survived those encounters with zero casualties. That doesn't happen very often. It's only natural that people see you as one of the most up-and-coming teams. So yes, you can aim high—I'd say it's only a matter of time before you reach the top ten."

Th-that was high praise coming from the governor of the fallen angels!

We were all clearly embarrassed over the warm comments, but that was where the niceties ended.

"However, you've also attracted a *lot* of attention. The whole underworld will be watching your next bout. You were already famous after stopping that evil god Loki and beating those terrorists. But then you managed to up the ante with your press conference. Yep, the inhabitants of the underworld are looking forward to seeing what's in store for you and the future of demonkind."

...The future of demonkind. Th-that sounded larger than life...

"Of course, the current top-ranking teams will be watching you all closely. I imagine they'll be doing the same for Sairaorg, too. They've undoubtedly started researching you guys as potential future opponents. That's good. The

higher end of the leaderboard has hardly changed in ages. Thinking what you and Sairaorg's team might bring to the future is exciting." Azazel let out a bright laugh. "Upend that leaderboard. The current top ten needs a little fresh blood. Overturn the hierarchy, Emperor Belial included, and breathe new life into the Rating Game."

Could we do that? Upend the Rating Game...? Defeat the reigning champion...? Take the top place ourselves...?

I certainly *wanted* to.

Champions! Conquerors of Rating Games! My dream was to become a harem king, but the undisputed ruler of Rating Games wouldn't be too bad, either! Most of all...I wanted to help the prez climb to the top.

That was *her* dream...

As for me, I had plenty of ambitions. I well and truly was a demon to possess this much greed.

Whatever stood in my way...I *would* make it happen! I'd turn those dreams into reality!



Once our meeting concluded, Azazel and Rossweisse left to see to their responsibilities as members of the Kuou Academy teaching staff.

The rest of us continued with our preparations for the Academy Festival. Kiba and I were handling the heavy lifting as usual.

I sneaked another glance at the prez. She was looking over her documents and notes from the meeting.

She still appeared to be in a bad mood. Hmm... What was I supposed to do? If I didn't help lift her spirits before the match, it could impact our performance. I had to apologize... I doubted she would forgive me if I didn't... The problem was my brain had yet to work out what I'd done wrong!

I was trying hard to think of the best course of action when *it* happened.

With a *whoosh*, a burst of light spread out across the table—quickly lighting up with the intricate design of a magic circle.

I know this pattern...

“...Phenex?” Koneko muttered.

She was right! That was the design of the House of Phenex!

It was only a small magic circle, so maybe it was one of those used for long-distance communication? But who...? It couldn't be Riser...right? What could *he* want?

I watched with suspicion when a holographic projection emerged above the circle. The face of a young woman stared back at us.

She wore her hair up and sported expensive-looking jewelry. Overall, she possessed elegant and dignified features.

“Mother!” Ravel cried out with a frantic grimace.

Mother? So that was Ravel's mom? That would make her Riser's mom, too, and the parent of the current head of the House of Phenex. She was beautiful and easily could have passed for a woman in her twenties. Seeing as she was a demon, it would've been hard to approximate her real age. Dang, she looked just like her daughter!

“How are you, Ravel? I apologize for calling without notice. I've been so busy, so I'm sorry for contacting you at this late hour. In Japan, it must still be school time, no?”

“Th-that's right, but, um, why are you calling?” Ravel questioned.

“...Are Rias and the Red Dragon Emperor with you?” Lady Phenex inquired.

The prez? And...me? Why me?

Our crimson-haired leader stood before the projection.

“Greetings, Lady Phenex. It's been too long.”

“Ah, Rias. How are you? It has been a while, hasn't it? And...?” Lady Phenex glanced around the room.

Was she looking for me? I rushed to position myself in front of the magic circle.

“Ah, hello. I'm Issei Hyoudou.”

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Red Dragon Emperor, Issei Hyoudou. I believe this is our first time speaking with each other? I'm sorry it couldn't be in person."

"N-not at all. H-how can I help you...?" I tried asking politely.

"I will have to introduce myself properly next time... Normally, it would only be appropriate for me to thank Rias in person for letting my daughter stay at the Hyoudou residence, but I'm afraid with the situation being what it is..."

"...Demand for Phoenix Tears has been skyrocketing, so she probably doesn't have much free time..." Kiba whispered to me.

That made sense. Ravel's family was the main supplier of Phoenix Tears, after all.

The House of Phenex was apparently having difficulty maintaining Phoenix Tear production to keep up with the demand caused by the recent terrorist attacks, so Lady Phenex was no doubt swamped with work. It sounded like hard stuff. I was grateful for that dedication!

"Not to worry, ma'am," the prez answered with a smile. "It's the thought that counts. Ravel is safe with us."

"Thank you again, Rias. You helped get Riser back on his feet after your match, and now you're looking after Ravel, too..."

Judging from her tone of voice, Lady Phenex spoke with true sincerity. I always thought the Phenex family would hold a grudge against us—and me in particular—for ruining the prez's engagement with Riser, but they didn't seem at all bothered. They were unexpectedly generous of heart.

Nonetheless, the prez's expression was conflicted. She probably felt obligated to take Ravel in and look after her.

Lady Phenex directed her attention to me. *"Issei Hyoudou, I would be most grateful to you in particular if you would be there for my daughter."*

M-me? And why did she emphasize the words in particular? I mean, I'll definitely assist in whatever way I can!

"N-naturally. But I think the prez and the others will be a better help than me..."

“Yes. Of course, with Rias and your friends around, I’m sure Ravel will have no trouble adapting to life at a human school. But what I’m asking of you is a little different. Won’t you help keep her safe from any foul pests up there in the human realm? My husband and I can rest easy with the Red Dragon Emperor protecting our daughter.”

“F-foul pests...?”

Was she asking me to keep pushy guys away from her daughter? Had she forgotten that I was a man like any other? I guess it was true that I wouldn’t lay a hand on her. She was my treasured underclassman. I—I couldn’t possibly harm her!

“I understand. I’ll do my best to keep your daughter safe!”

At this declaration, Lady Phenex beamed. Ravel, on the other hand, turned bright red.

Er, was something the matter...?

—.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the prez look a little pissed for an instant, but maybe I was imagining things.

“I’m most grateful... Ravel?”

“Yes, Mother?”

“You know what is expected of you, I hope? You must support Rias, listen to your upperclassmen, and most of all, deepen your relationship with Issei Hyoudou. Be sure not to tarnish the family name. Understood?”

“Of course!”

I couldn’t quite work it out, but mother and daughter seemed to be discussing something serious. Ravel’s face was scarlet, yet she looked really energetic.

“Finally, Issei Hyoudou?” Lady Phenex addressed me again.

“Y-yes?”

“I’ve heard that your ambition is to become a high-class demon.”

“Yeah... That’s right.”

"My daughter is presently my Bishop. I traded Riser for her."

"Oh, uh, yeah. I heard."

"Good. Then keep this in mind. My daughter is free. She's my Bishop. She doesn't belong to Riser. Do you hear?"

"Y-yes! I—I understand!"

I already knew that, but I nodded anyway.

Lady Phenex bobbed her head, too, seeming curiously satisfied... Why?

"That concludes my business. Rias, Issei Hyoudou, everyone—please forgive my sudden intrusion. I must go. Ravel, be sure to conduct yourself with the dignity of a lady in the human realm."

"I will, Mother."

"In that case, farewell."

The holographic projection let out a bright flash, then dissipated.

Lady Phenex had swept in like a storm and had disappeared just as quickly. Undoubtedly, she was fretting over her daughter and had wanted to meet us all. I hadn't followed everything she said, though...

Still filled with uncertainty, I let out a sigh. Meanwhile, the prez went for the door. Her feet looked unsteady.

"...P-Prez? Are you going somewhere?" I called out.

She stopped in her tracks and, without looking back, whispered, "...Issei. Will you protect *me*?"

What was this all of a sudden? I wasn't sure, but I knew how to answer!

"Of course I'll protect you, Prez!"

"...And Asia?"

"Huh? Obviously, I'll look after her as well!"

"And Akeno?"

"Akeno? You bet. But...why do you ask?"

I couldn't guess what she was getting at for the life of me.

"...Issei?" she called again, voice almost imperceptibly soft.

"Y-yes...?"

"*What* am I to you? *Who* am I?"

...

The meaning of that question...

"...Um, you're the prez—"

"—! Idiot!" she shouted before I could finish. There were tears in her eyes.

With that, she took off, charging out of the clubroom.

"Rias!" Asia called out, chasing after her. When she reached the door, she glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes were moist like the prez's! Was she crying? "Issei! You're horrible...! Why can't you understand Rias's feelings?!" That was all she said before following after the prez.



...

Even Asia was angry at me now. All I could do was stand there in mute shock and confusion.

H-hold on! Wait! What do you mean?! Why are you angry at me now, Asia?!

"Bad move, Issei," Kiba remarked with a sigh.

"Wh-what does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. You really have no clue, do you...? I can understand why they're both upset."

"Indeed. It's only natural they'd be angry." Akeno sounded cross.

Wh-what had I done...?

"I might not be the most perceptive in these matters, but even I'm appalled, Issei," Xenovia added, staring at me coldly.

"Argh! You're awful, Issei! Awful! Poor Rias!" Irina was fuming as well.

"...You're the worst."

What?! Koneko had said that to me before, but never with such an icy chill! Seriously, what was my mistake? I didn't know! Was going after the prez and Asia the right choice?

I moved to leave, yet Akeno stepped in my way.

"Stop," she said. "With your current mindset, you'll make things worse, Issei."

...Seriously?

Was the situation that grave? H-had I screwed up so seriously?

I honestly couldn't understand what was going on.

Actually, I had *one* idea, but I didn't think it possible...

There was no way... So what was the answer? Dammit! Just thinking about it was making me more confused!

"...Hey, Gasper. Am I really at fault here?" I questioned.

"...Um... Yes, definitely...", he answered apologetically, twitching in

discomfort.

Even *he* thought so!

I was sinking into despair by the moment.

“U-um...,” Ravel began awkwardly. “Th-this is because of my mother and me, isn’t it...? I’m sorry...”

So it was *her* doing? I suppose the prez *had* left after our conversation with Lady Phenex...

Akeno placed a hand on Ravel’s shoulder. “Don’t you worry about it. Issei is the cause. He hasn’t spared a passing thought to what matters most to Rias.”

After those words of encouragement, Akeno urged Ravel to take a seat on the sofa while she prepared some tea.

Yep, it seemed I was the culprit.

Ugh. What was I supposed to do now?



“What’s with everyone...? Why are they all acting like that...?” I muttered in an empty room in the old school building.

After the events in the clubroom, Akeno had directed us all to continue our preparations for the Academy Festival. The tense atmosphere had cooled somewhat after she left to search for the prez and Asia.

I was proceeding with my work alone. Kiba and Gasper had left to go shopping.

Our plan was to use this room to perform a pseudo-exorcism of sorts, a purification ritual, during the Academy Festival. Naturally, given that we were demons, the real deal was too dangerous. Instead, we were going with an original demon-style one, even if that did sound like a contradiction.

My task was to decorate the space in a Japanese style. I’d already laid out the tatami mats and arranged everything to resemble the interior of a Shinto shrine.

Akeno would be in charge of this event on the day of the festival, while Koneko would use her sage magic to improve the *qi* flow of any visitors to boost

their luck.

Phew... Now that I was alone, I couldn't help but reflect on what had happened.

Where had I gone wrong? I hadn't spared a passing thought to what was most important to the prez...? That was what Akeno told me...

Lately, it seemed that everyone—the prez, her mother, and all the people around us—all wanted something of me. And it had to do with my attitude toward the prez.

Thoughts from before the meeting came to mind. There were two things in particular.

The first was that I'd failed to comprehend my master's feelings and had hurt her in the process.

As for the second...

That one still seemed like pure fantasy on my part, and as much as I would have loved for it to be true, I couldn't bring myself to tread too far down that path...

But if it *was* the case...it would certainly explain everything that had occurred since the prez moved into my house.

I'd always had my doubts.

There were three guys in the Gremory Familia—me, Kiba, and Gasper. It was well known that the prez held deep affection for her servants, but wasn't it a little strange how she treated us so differently?

I mean, she'd kissed me.

It hadn't even been on the forehead or on the cheek. There was no mistaking mouth-to-mouth contact for anything else. She'd even used her tongue. And not just once or twice, either.

Unsurprisingly, I'd been overjoyed each time. Who wouldn't have been delighted to kiss the woman they loved? It was heaven! True paradise! The prez had even gone so far as to offer a suggestive invitation! I'd been on the verge of taking her up on that offer!

Initially, I'd attributed all her doting to the fact that I was younger than her and new to the Familia. I'd assumed all the affection was a way to forge a bond, a reward for loyalty.

But in that case, why didn't she do anything similar with Kiba or Gasper? Both had made clear that she didn't engage in anything like that with them. This special treatment seemed to be reserved for me alone.

She did adore Kiba and Gasper, and clearly cherished them both. However, there was an undeniable difference in the way that manifested.

On top of that, she had always been very particular when it came to romance. Part of that seemed to be due to naivete, while another portion was her old-fashioned, maidenly way of thinking. That was why she'd broken off her engagement with Riser.

The prez had become much more physical with me after ending her betrothal. And it was around that time that she decided to move into my house.

Would someone so pure and innocent act so seductive, so stimulating, so *intimate* just because she adored her servant? No...I didn't think so. From an objective point of view, she clearly valued her chastity.

Taking all that into account, I couldn't help but wonder...

Does the prez...like me...?

That was the only conceivable explanation.

If so, it would certainly explain her recent attitude toward me...

N-no! It can't be! She's my master! I'm her servant! A member of her Familia! Rias Gremory's Pawn!

B-but! If it was true, if she *did* like me, what then...?

I liked her, too. Not just as my master—as a girl! During these past six months, I'd seen her from so many different angles.

Her brilliance, nobility, glamor, gentleness, anger, voluminous breasts, adorable cuteness, silky-smooth skin, selfish streak, and how she acted like an older lady at times and like a girl our age at others. Through all that, I'd come to see her as a regular teenager...

She was my ideal woman. I wanted to date her. I wanted to go beyond a standard master-servant relationship! If possible, I wanted to stand by her side going forward!

...Was it true? Did she really like me in that way? If so, I might ascend to the heavens in elation. Heck, I wanted to confess these feelings that grew stronger inside me by the day.

I adored her! I was in love with her! I would always love her!

And I wanted to tell her all that!

If I was wrong, though... It would jeopardize everything we'd built. I couldn't stand that!

And as indecision whirled in my head, *she* came to me.

...

Cold sweat began to run down my face. My hands were trembling. I could feel my excitement rising.

No. This *had* to be a wild fantasy, a mad delusion. I was certain of it. If I hoped for anything more, everything I had now would crumble away.

I'd be forced to face it for myself—the insurmountable barrier separating master from servant.

Hah. Right. That's just the way of things. Why would a noble lady from a high-class demon family settle for me, a reincarnated human from a no-name household?

"But what about her attitude...? Dammit, a maiden's heart sure is complicated...," I muttered.

At that moment, the door swung open with an audible squeak. Looking over my shoulder, I spied Akeno in her shrine maiden outfit.

"Heh-heh. Perhaps it does seem that way from a man's perspective."

She was flashing me her usual warm smile. Ah! And Koneko came in behind her!

"A-Akeno! And Koneko, too! D-did you hear me...?"

“...Perfectly,” Koneko answered in the affirmative with a thumbs-up.

They caught it all?!

I collapsed on a tatami mat with my shoulders slumped.

“I—I guess I really *haven’t* considered the prez’s feelings enough.”

Akeno sat down beside me, and Koneko did the same. “Indeed, that’s true. You haven’t contemplated mine, Asia’s, Xenovia’s, or Koneko’s, either.”

“...”

I pondered Akeno’s words for a long moment.

Seriously? Was I really so blind to all of them...? I was always busy fantasizing about women, dreaming of their sublime bodies, yet had I never seen all the girls in my life for who they really were?

Maybe so. It never struck me to try understanding a maiden’s heart.

I’d failed all the girls of the Gremory Familia...

“Maybe we didn’t try to understand you well enough, either, Issei.”

That was Asia’s voice. When I glanced up, I found her there, looking down. She approached and sat across from me.

“...Me?”

“Yes,” Akeno answered. “We’ve realized something. It’s our job to look after Rias, but perhaps we need to help heal you, too?”

Heal me...?

Having finished speaking, Akeno...started removing my clothes?!

H-hold on a second there, Akeno! What was she planning to do to my naked chest?!

“Heh-heh. I think I need to suck more dragon power out of you, right here.”

H-here?!

At that moment, she began to remove her shrine maiden outfit! Her glorious breasts plopped out before my very eyes! The next thing I knew, she was embracing me from behind! I could feel the soft, tender warmth of her breasts

directly against my back! In seemingly no time at all, my blood had reached a boil!

“...It’s time for your sage magic treatment. Hold me.”

Koneko embraced me from the front! She was in full cat mode, her feline ears popping up as she began to unleash her sage magic!

Ahhh, I could feel the warmth of her *qi* flowing out from her petite breasts... And then there were the fully ripe ones pressing against my back as well!

“Mwaaaaahhhhh...”

“Ah!” I gasped.

Akeno had just started sucking on the back of my neck! She used her tongue so sensually! Sucking and licking—wonderfully wet and ticklish! Could she really drain my dragon power this way?! I was happy for her to try!

I had a *nekomata* at the gates and a super-seductive Great Lady at the rear! What an extraordinary situation! It was a seductive love sandwich!

“...I—I’ll help!” Asia began to remove her clothes, then took my hand and placed it on her chest!

My brain almost exploded with excitement as the soft, squishy feeling of her wonderful feminine flesh coursed through my body!

At the same moment, a pale-green aura began to emanate from her body, enveloping my own.

This was her healing ability at work. What an incredible predicament. Akeno was sucking out my excess dragon energy, Koneko was mending my body with her sage magic, while Asia was filling me with the warmth of her healing aura!

I was having the time of my life surrounded by these three beauties, but I could barely take it anymore! I was at my limit!

It was then that Akeno, her voice tinged with sadness, whispered, “Sometimes when you look at us, Issei, there’s so much fear in your eyes. I didn’t understand why at first, but I’ve finally worked it out.”

—.

Fear...in my eyes...? It was showing through, and I hadn't even realized...

Koneko lifted her face to stare up at me, tears in her eyes. "...Maybe only those of us who know what happened to you have noticed."

What happened to me...

Yeah, I knew what she was referring to... Akeno and Koneko must have caught on.

Only those who were members of prez's Familia when I'd joined knew the details.

"Is Raynare...still lurking in your heart, Issei?" Asia asked warily.

"—!"

A beautiful girl with black wings appeared in my mind's eye.

"Could you die for me?"

My first girlfriend, Yuuma—no, the fallen angel Raynare.

An uneasy sweat started beading on my forehead...

The events of that evening flashed before my eyes once more.

"Don't talk to me like that, you filthy, low-level demon."

Sometimes, I found myself holding back when I should have called out to the beautiful girls in our Familia.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Oh? But that little date you took me on was so ordinary! You can't imagine how bored I was!"

Every time I went shopping with the prez or the others, I wondered whether they found being with me tedious.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! A spoiled brat like you has no right to utter my true name!"

I mean, I *wanted* to call the prez by name...!

"Issei! Help me! The demon is going to kill me! I love you, Issei! Please help me defeat her!"

My first girlfriend had begged me to save her life...and then the woman I loved most had killed her.

At the time, it felt right that Raynare had died. She'd done such horrible things to Asia, even murdering her. So I'd thought it just when the prez finished that wicked fallen angel off.

Now, however, I wasn't so sure.

There were tears running down my cheeks... I wiped them away with my hand and whispered, "...She was my first girlfriend."

It was the happiest moment of my life when she confessed to me.

"...I did my best to take her on a good date. I planned everything out so carefully. I was even thinking about our future—about Christmas, about Valentine's Day. I was an idiot off in a fantasy world of my own making..."

After so long, I was finally voicing what I'd kept bottled up all this time.

Trying to lighten the story was pointless. I couldn't bring myself to joke or smile when it came to this deep-rooted pain.

"But she was an enemy...! She killed me...! And after I became a demon, she looked at me with such...contempt. It had all been an act... Maybe I could have accepted that much, but then...! Sh-she went and killed Asia and forced me to fight her! I lost it! That was the first time I ever hit a girl, and she was my first girlfriend...! Then she begged for her life, but the prez killed her anyway..."

Raynare's death—those black feathers scattering throughout the church. That scene remained bitterly engraved in my mind, and each time I returned to that memory, the world seemed to stop.

"Asia, Akeno, Koneko... I—I'm scared. The truth is, I'm afraid of getting close to girls... Because what if the same thing happens again...? Everyone in our Familia is so kind to me, but if I try to take what we have to the next level, I could end up getting rejected, humiliated... I *know* none of you are like that. I do...! You're all good people! Yet I can't move past it! The second I think about getting close, the brakes kick in, dragging me to a halt!"

I...covered my face with my hands. I didn't want them to see me like this.

They couldn't realize how weak and pitiful I was...

Yet despite that, I couldn't stop myself from speaking the truth.

“...I don’t want to go through...the same thing again...”

I truly was pathetic, cowering like this...

In front of the very girls to whom I had declared, again and again, my dream of becoming a harem king, I had confessed the ironic reality—I didn’t have the courage to take even a single relationship to the next stage...

With things as they were, I wouldn’t blame them if they felt disgusted by what they saw in me now.

Yet Asia...tightened her grip on my hand.

She flashed me a gentle smile. “I—I love you, Issei.”

—.

I sat in mute amazement while Asia continued. “I want to stay with you forever. I would never mock you. I respect you. You’re the most reliable, admirable man I’ve ever known. I want to live by your side forever. That’s what I want, from the bottom of my heart.”

Her smile, her words, resonated within me.

“Rias would never hate you, Issei. I—I know you like her. You fight harder for her than anyone else. We all know that. And she must know it, too.”

Asia...

She’d been watching over me this whole time. I thought I had been protecting her, but maybe she had been the one keeping a close watch on me...

Her presence made me feel safe, secure.

“Be brave, Issei. You’ll be fine. You’ve worked so hard. I’m sure you’ll be able to break through this wall holding you back.”

Faced with such encouragement, all I could do was tear up! Dammit! This was sweat of the heart formed in response to the most comforting assault I’d ever known!

Akeno hugged me close from behind.

“I love you, too, Issei,” she whispered as she placed her face on my shoulder.

Koneko took hold of my face with both hands and beamed. "...Me too. I love you. It's okay to put that fallen angel behind you."

"That's right. If it's a fallen angel you want, I can satisfy that thirst, Issei. So be strong. If you don't move forward with Rias, I..." Akeno trailed off.

"Me too..." Asia added. Then she gasped a little, as though realizing something else. "We all want you to let us in more, Issei."

Everyone was being so kind. I could feel something inside me thawing.

Asia, Akeno, Koneko—their words lit a fire inside me, gradually melting away the *thing* that had long held me back.

What was this feeling, this warmth in my heart...? These three girls had given me something that filled the hole inside.

"Asia... Akeno... Koneko... I—I...!"

Finally, I felt like I might be able to shake off Raynare's curse.

The bonds that had been holding me back were loosening.

"Rias, Akeno, Koneko, Xenovia, Irina, Rossweisse, Kiba, Gasper, and I all love you, Issei. Will you trust what we're saying...?"

Asia...

Thank you, Asia. You really were watching out for me. I was truly blessed to have a kind girl like you stand by me forever.

Thanks to everyone, I finally had the strength to shake off Raynare! Why hadn't I realized this sooner...?

I wiped away my tears and pulled myself together.

"Thank you. With you all here to help me, I know I can do it. Asia, I want to renew my promise with you. I'll stick by you to the end. Let's spend the next ten thousand years in each other's company, Asia. I love you."

"—! Y-yes! Forever! I love you, Issei!" she exclaimed with tears of joy.

"Oh dear. I'll always be with you as well, Issei," Akeno said, pressing her voluptuous breasts firmly against my back and nuzzling against my shoulder.

“I’ll stand by you, too, Issei. Always,” Koneko added, giving my stomach a light jab.

Was she a little angry?

“Ah! Xenovia, hold on!”

“What is it, Irina? Did you find Issei?”

Irina and Xenovia suddenly appeared in the doorway! Had they both been searching for me?

When Xenovia laid eyes on the situation in the room, she slammed her fist into the palm of her hand as though coming to a realization.

“Ah, so you’re fighting over Issei? I guess I can’t afford to let my guard down around you guys, huh? And is this one of those days where you try to push him down and strip him naked? In that case, leave it to me!” Without hesitation, Xenovia boldly tore off her clothes as she strode toward us!

“Irina, you get over here, too. If you don’t, you’ll lose your childhood friend. Or rather, I’ll take him for my own!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?! I—I should join in, too, right?! As Lord Michael’s Ace, making a baby with a Heavenly Dragon will get me promoted to the next level! So I have to fight for Issei!” Irina, egged on by Xenovia, started moving my way, her wings flashing between white and black!

“Y-you guys! You’ve got to stop coming on to me with no warning!”

All at once, I was surrounded by five beauties, each of them taking turns arguing with one another. What was I to do?

“Issei is going to be with *me*!” Asia declared.

“Come on,” Xenovia replied. “Just let me borrow him for a bit.”

“Asia, Xenovia, remember to be fair!” Irina chided.

“Oh dear. There’s nothing more thrilling than getting a head start on the others, wouldn’t you say, Koneko?” Akeno remarked.

Our *nekomata* nodded. “...They say the early bird gets the worm, Akeno.”

All I could do was watch with a half smile as the girls battled it out.

Yep, there was still a lot about women that I didn't understand.

Nonetheless...they'd saved me.

The girls in this Familia had pulled me up to the surface.

Raynare's memory had been lurking in my heart for so long now. Little by little, that burden was beginning to ease.

Even if I couldn't erase it completely, there was no mistaking that it was lighter now.

Thank you, Asia, Akeno, and Koneko. You too, Xenovia and Irina.

The courage I'd lacked for so long had been sparked to life.

No matter what happened, I would push on, I would follow my feelings.

There was still a chance that this wasn't the answer the prez wanted from me, but I'd made up my mind. I'd already been considering it for a while.

Once I defeated Sairaorg, I would confess these feelings in my heart.

I swore it to myself as the decisive battle loomed.

Life.3

The Battle to Decide the Strongest Demon Youth Begins!

The day of our match had arrived.

“Awesome! There really is an island floating in the sky.”

I stared up at the hovering city as a gondola lift carried us to our destination. Asia, Irina, Xenovia, Koneko, and Gasper all looked just as impressed as I was.

There was a metropolis situated on that floating island—the city of Agreas. Apparently, the power that kept the landmass airborne had been developed during the era of the old Demon Kings. The only person alive today who understood how it worked was Ajuka Beelzebub. As such, the members of his Familia were responsible for maintaining it.

A flying island was a pretty rare sight, huh? Water fell over the edges in mighty cascades. And not just one or two, either—there were so many waterfalls. It was like a real-life fantasy!

I was completely entranced. I should have expected no less from the underworld, the home of demons. It was almost *too* incredible!

The landmass was situated over the Agares territory, and its city had been constructed as a base to manage the surrounding airspace. It also doubled as a tourist attraction.

There were three main ways to reach the floating city. The easiest was to use a magic circle to jump there directly, but that method was reserved for VIPs or those who’d received special permission. The island was a significant cultural landmark in the underworld, so its overseers tried to limit the use of magic circles as much as possible.

I could understand why. There was always a chance that a demon might seek to cause damage or mayhem up there.

The second way to reach the island was via airship or some other form of flying vehicle. This approach was much more frequently used than teleportation. The third was to come by gondola lift, as we were now, ascending along the cables that connected the city to the world below.

We'd all agreed upon the gondola ride. When the prez had mentioned in passing how great the view from the lift was, we'd all gotten super pumped to see it for ourselves.

Thus, gathered in a gondola car, we rode up together, admiring the magnificent scenery through the windows.

Ah, it was a beautiful day! There was no better time for our match! A battle atop a floating island meant I had to be careful not to fall off. Getting disqualified for leaving the battlefield like that would be mortifying.

"You know, I think the higher-ups argued a fair bit about where to hold your fight," Azazel said, eyes still fixed on the sky.

We all turned to him.

"An argument...? About the venue?" I questioned.

Azazel nodded. "The bigwigs among the new regime supporters wanted it to be held in either the Gremory territory or one owned by a Demon King. But those in the House of Bael got all puffed up about the purity of their bloodline and demanded that it be held in the Bael territory. I hear it was quite a fierce debate."

—.

To think they had quarreled over something like that.

Azazel wasn't finished. "The current Demon Kings don't have any hereditary titles, so for those who place worth on labels and lineages, the princely House of Bael ranks higher than the Demon Kings. They're placed first among the Seventy-Two Pillars, after all."

"There were similar problems with those who sided with the old Demon King regime in the past, too, right? Why would they want to cause the same problems now...?" I asked.

Azazel gestured with his hand as he let out a sigh. “That’s that—this is this. Whether it’s up in the human realm or down here in the underworld, adults are complicated beings. It’s all about appearances and influence. And, well, the aristocracy still dominates demon society, and that just leads to other issues...”

“...So they settled on the Agares territory...?” Koneko muttered.

Azazel nodded. “Yeah. Sounds like Archduke Agares interceded between the Demon Kings and those siding with the House of Bael. He’s basically an intermediary, an agent of the Demon Kings. The times may have changed, but the House of Agares has always been caught in the crossfire whenever there’s strife.”

The current heir’s glasses-adorned face flashed in my memory. She was around the same age as us and seemingly destined for big things in the future just like we were... I could already imagine her telling us off whenever we got in trouble.

“...So our match will effectively be a proxy battle between the forces of the Demon Kings and those of the princely House of Bael?” Kiba questioned with a frown.

Azazel stroked his chin in thought. “Well, there are a lot of folks who see it that way. The Breast Dragon and the Switch Princess versus Sairaorg, the most powerful demon youth—but that’s really just a cover, an excuse to entertain the masses. Behind the scenes, the politicians and their ilk are just waiting to see what happens.”

Politics? Were there deeper machinations beneath our Rating Game?

“What a pain. We’re here fighting for our own ambitions, and they’re advancing their agendas from the sidelines?” I remarked.

Azazel gave me a wry grin. “You guys only need to worry about yourselves. Even if you lose, it won’t harm Sirzechs’s position. Although those chumps in the House of Bael might get a bit of a windfall, and Sairaorg’s people will probably benefit.”

“There are politicians backing Sairaorg?” I asked.

“Having come this far on the back of nothing more than his own strength, I

doubt he would allow himself to be swayed by politicians now. That said, he *has* forged connections to build a support base on his path to the top.”

So basically, if you wanted to make grand dreams a reality, you needed to make deals with connected people... Come to think of it, I was acquainted with Sirzechs and Leviathan myself.

From an outsider’s perspective, those relationships could seem like political alliances. After all, they were both Demon Kings...

There was one thing about this I really couldn’t accept.

“So those high-class demons want to take advantage of Sairaorg, even after making him suffer because he didn’t inherit his family’s unique powers...?” I muttered.

From what I’d heard, it was the current head of the House of Bael who’d abandoned Sairaorg in the first place, so the family’s other allies had to have been complicit.

And now they were all flocking to Sairaorg. Perhaps that was further proof of his strength.

Azazel breathed a sigh. “It’s complicated, but that pretty much sums it up. Think of it this way: He’s gone through a lot, and now he’s finally making up for it. Achievements beget recognition. Depending on the scale of the accomplishment, of course... Anyway, don’t worry about Sairaorg’s dealings. Just do your best. You won’t stand a chance if you don’t give it everything you’ve got.”

I knew that. We couldn’t afford to go easy on him. This was a match. We were here to win, to pursue our own dreams.

“But will the supporters of the princely House of Bael really acknowledge Sairaorg’s goals?” Kiba inquired. “He wants to create an underworld where demons aren’t bound by status and titles so they can achieve what they desire through effort alone, right?”

Would they really accept Sairaorg despite all that?

“...Do you honestly think the single highest-ranked princely House would go

that far?” Azazel replied. “They back him publicly, but behind the scenes, they still despise him. To them, Sairaorg is no more than a political tool to help them get back at the Demon Kings. And Sairaorg himself is surely aware. He’s a genuine, patient guy.”

That sounded awful. Yet Sairaorg was willing to swallow that bitter pill if it meant reaching his goals... I could hardly fathom the depths of his ambition.

Another question suddenly came to mind, and I spoke up. “This might be a little late, but what if those terrorists, the Hero Faction, target the match?”

“They very well might. Your Rating Game will be getting a whole lot of attention, and the leaders of quite a few factions will be gathering in one place to watch. Honestly, it’s the perfect chance to take them all out,” Azazel answered casually. “If the Hero Faction was to send a bunch of its heavy-duty Balance Breaker users in, that would certainly help push their agenda. We’ve got security at the venue on maximum alert. Then again, it may all be for nothing.”

So there was a chance that this could go haywire?! And it was just as possible that our fears were needless?

“What makes you think nothing will happen?” Akeno pressed.

Azazel scratched at his cheek. “...Vali sent me a private message.”

“!!!!!!!!!!!!!!—!”

Everyone, myself included, was startled! Naturally! Who expected to hear his name?!

“You got a message from Vali?” I asked.

“Yeah. That upstart kept it brief: ‘This is gonna be an important match for the members of the Gremory Familia, since they’re fighting that guy from the House of Bael. I’ve got my eye on it. I won’t let anyone get in Issei Hyoudou’s way.’ That was basically it. Sounds like you’ve got yourself an admirer, Issei.”

“C-cut it out! You’re making my skin crawl!”

Th-that creep! He’d actually said that?! The nerve, looking down on me, watching over me, hoping I’ll get stronger! Admittedly, I *did* feel somewhat

relieved by this news, which probably only served as proof that deep down, I acknowledged Vali's abilities like he did mine. Dammit! I hated admitting that!

Azazel paid my frustration no heed and simply went on. "From the sound of it, Vali's keeping a close eye on Cao Cao and his ilk. I doubt they'll be willing to attack us during the match if it means fighting Team Vali, too. You've seen the legendary monsters the White Dragon Emperor has gathered around him. Engaging them would inevitably mean suffering heavy casualties. I'm guessing the Hero Faction won't make a move unless there's something else to be gained by doing so."

That was one way of looking at it.

"...In other words, Vali's offered us his protection, huh?"

It was a difficult idea to wrap my head around, but at least I could rest assured that we could focus solely on the fight.

Azazel stared out the window. "It's also possible Cao Cao never even intended to target us here. He could be hoping to take advantage of this distraction to strike elsewhere. Which is why everyone else is on guard."

True peace was still a long way off...

People were saying that our fight against the Hero Faction could end up being a long one. Undoubtedly, there were many hurdles before us on the path to our dreams.

While I ruminated on such thoughts, the gondola lift finally arrived at the floating city.

When we stepped onto solid land, we were greeted by a huge crowd of fans and media reporters and were bombarded with cries of joy and camera flashes. Escorted by an entourage of security guards and Rating Game staff, we stepped into a limousine waiting for us nearby.

"You're finally here."

Ravel was waiting in the car. She'd arrived ahead of us and had been busying herself with all the necessary preparations. She really was dedicated to helping out.

The crowd was huge. Once more, I had to grapple with our startling popularity...

When I glanced out the window—I spotted what looked like a car full of paparazzi chasing after us!

“You guys are gonna need personal managers—especially Rias and Issei. Whether you win or lose this time around, it will only add to your fame. Things might calm down a bit with time, but expect it to be like this for a while whenever you come to the underworld. Hey, I’ve got it. Ravel, why don’t *you* become Issei’s manager? He’s a bit of a perv, but you’ll learn a lot hanging around him,” Azazel said with a lecherous grin.

Slap!

With no warning, Akeno hit him over the head with a paper fan!

“Wh-what was that for, Akeno?!” he cried back with tears in his eyes.

She replied with a forced smile. “Heh-heh. This is a delicate time, so please refrain from saying anything provocative for the moment. Isn’t that right, President?” Akeno gave the prez a wink.

“...”

Rias’s only answer was a silent pout, although her cheeks turned red.

Ravel must have detected the strained atmosphere, because she refrained from saying anything herself.

The prez seemed a little better today. She was still awkward when speaking to me, but she wasn’t so upset as to lash out—or worse, ignore me altogether.

After the recent incident, it seemed that the girls, led by Akeno, had done their best to comfort her.

No doubt that was why she was almost back to her usual self... Th-the others must have told her about me, but what exactly had they said to help?

W-well, I knew better than to press. The match would be getting underway soon, and now that the prez was back on her feet, we could face it with all our strength.

A manager, huh? I'd never so much as considered it before, but I probably *would* need one.

Still, Ravel...? When it came to the Familia as a whole, Grayfia looked after our scheduling and the like, but it would be another thing entirely when it came to me as an individual.

I couldn't ask anyone else in the Familia to take on that responsibility, and Ravel *was* the only other demon whom I really knew well.

I thought on it while the limousine moved through the city toward the huge dome where our fight would be held.



There were a great many entertainment venues throughout the floating city. Chief among them was the huge stadium used mainly for various competitions and performances, the Agreas Dome.

Our present destination was a luxurious high-rise hotel directly beside it.

It was an opulent structure, magnificent in design. Ever since I'd been reincarnated as a demon of the Gremory Familia, I saw more and more of this kind of grandeur.

The building had a spacious lobby, and its gilded floor shone in the light. A huge chandelier hung from the ceiling, too. However, I couldn't help but feel that it wasn't quite as impressive as the main Gremory mansion. Then again, the Gremorys lived in a genuine castle, so everything probably paled in comparison.

A bellboy led us to our private suite. Our Rating Game didn't begin until the evening, so we'd be waiting here until then.

As we made our way down the hall, a group appeared farther ahead. There was something unsettling about their presence, and a cold aura prickled my skin.

All of them wore deep hoods that masked their faces, and their long robes concealed everything down to their feet.

The figure at the center of the group was dressed in something that resembled a priest's outfit.

Hold on, is that...?

When we drew closer, I was left speechless by what I saw.

It was a skeleton.

And it *was* draped in priestly attire, including some kind of holy-looking headgear—a miter, I think it was called. A long staff was clutched in its bony hand.

The skeleton priest came to a stop directly in front of us.

Its empty eye sockets glowed with an eerie light.

“If it isn’t a crimson-haired Gremory. And the governor of the fallen angels, too.”

That voice hadn’t emanated from its mouth... How was it speaking, then? Was it using some kind of magic to convey its thoughts?

At this greeting, Azazel flashed the skeleton a sardonic grin. “Well now, if isn’t Hades, the god of death, up from the realm of the dead in the lowest reaches of the underworld, I see. And you’ve brought a band of grim reapers with you, too. I wouldn’t have expected to see *you* here, seeing how much you despise demons and fallen angels.”

The god of death...? The realm of the dead...? Hades?! So that skeleton was a real-life god?! No wonder I felt so uneasy in his presence...

“Kya-ha-ha-ha... You’ve a mouth on you, crow. I hear you’ve all been busy, so I decided to check in.”

“You seem to be the only member of the Greek pantheon who doesn’t like the idea of a peaceful compromise, you old sack of bones.”

“What of it? Will you slaughter another old man, just as you did Loki?”

With that, the group surrounding the skeleton priest—Hades—braced themselves, radiating vicious, murderous intent.

Are they gearing up for a fight? Cut me some slack! We’re about to go into an important match!

Azazel breathed a sigh, shaking his head. “I’m suggesting you open your mind

a little, like that lecherous geezer Odin did. I only ever hear dark rumors when it comes to you.”

“Kya-ha-ha-ha... With you crows and bats squawking like mad up here, I thought it time for a little soundproofing work.”

Hades’s voice was filled with hostility and scorn.

By ‘crows,’ does he mean fallen angels? Which would make ‘bats’ demons, right...?

At that moment, the skeleton set his sights on me! Wh-why me?! The light in his eye sockets glimmered.

“Welsh Dragon. I remember when you and the Vanishing Dragon rampaged through the depths of Hell together...”

Do you know this guy, Ddraig?

“I did. A little. A long time ago.”

Had something happened between them...? Hades wouldn’t hold a grudge against *me* for being the present Red Dragon Emperor, would he...? I was seriously terrified by the idea of fighting a skeleton. What if he cursed me or something?!

“No matter. I’ll enjoy myself today. Try not to die on us all. I haven’t come here tonight to collect your souls.”

With those parting words, the skeleton—Hades—left us.

I breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat from my forehead. The others must have been tense, too, because I saw them ease up after Hades was gone.

“I heard about Hades back when I was a Valkyrie, but actually seeing him... It felt like he could have ripped my spirit from my body...,” Rossweisse muttered.

Right, my thoughts exactly! It felt like he saw right through me to my innermost soul! Was this what it meant to rule over the forces of life and death...?

“Th-that was scary... The amount of pressure that skeleton was giving off...,” I said.

Azazel cracked his neck. “You can say that again. He’s one of the best among any pantheon.”

“...Is he stronger than you, Teach?”

“That skeletal old codger? Yep... Listen, whatever you do, don’t make an enemy of him. That goes for his freakish grim reapers as well.”

Seriously?! He was stronger even than Azazel and Sirzechs?! And his servants were, too?! I couldn’t accept such a frightening reality!

Hades shot right to the top of my People I Never Want to Meet Again list.

“So he’s an evil god...,” I remarked.

Azazel shook his head. “No, he just hates demons and fallen angels... Or rather, he hates *everyone* from other mythologies. He’s pretty calm when it comes to dealing with humans. Plus, he’s a necessary part of the underworld. Not that I care for him.”

Whoa. I could hear the hatred in Azazel’s voice. For my part, I doubted I would get along with Hades. I mean, the way he’d looked down on us demons, his absolute hatred and hostility...

I had to pause to catch my breath after the encounter. Unfortunately, my moment of peace ended abruptly as lively laughter thundered from down the hallway.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! I’ve arrived, Azazel!”

“As have I, Azazel, you rascal! Gwa-ha-ha-ha!”

Two burly, bearded men were rushing up toward the governor of the fallen angels.

Azazel breathed a tired sigh. “So you came, Zeus, Poseidon... You old fogies are always so overbearing. Frankly, I wish Hades shared your senses of passion.”

Zeus and Poseidon! I’d met Poseidon, the bearded middle-aged man who kept naked from the waist up, once before on a small matter, but this was my first time ever laying eyes on his equally hairy companion who sported a crown and toga. This was the legendary Zeus!

A pair of incredible gods were running down the corridor at us! What an astonishing sight!

They appeared to know Azazel and instantly set to teasing him.

“You still haven’t taken a wife, Azazel my boy? It must get lonely being single all the time!”

“Let me introduce you to a gal! There are more beauties than you can count at the bottom of the sea! Gwa-ha-ha-ha!”

“Come on, you don’t need to worry about me...”

Azazel was getting pushed around! Now *this* was a fresh sight for the eyes! Evidently, even a mighty fallen angel had to bow his head to some people! Poseidon and Zeus were gods of the same pantheon as Hades, but they were clearly far more outgoing than the ruler of the dead.

“Hey there, everyone,” greeted a familiar voice.

Glancing around, I spotted a teeny dragon floating in the air behind us.

I certainly didn’t know any miniature dragons, but that voice...

“...! Is that you, Tannin?! You’re tiny!”

“Ha-ha-ha! My natural form makes it inconvenient to get around indoors. I sometimes transform for social events.”

He could shrink himself down that small?! He was adorable, just like Asia’s baby dragon familiar!

Tannin cast his gaze over each of us. “Your opponent today is said to be the strongest demon youth, but if you ask me, you aren’t at all inferior. Take the fight to him with everything you have.”

“Of course! We’ll win for sure!” My voice was brimming with energy.

Friendly faces at times like this sure did wonders for my confidence! Tannin had come to cheer us on today, and I planned to give him something worth watching!

“Ah! Lord Odin!” Rossweisse cried frantically, and she pointed.

I followed her outstretched hand, and sure enough, there he was. Odin!

“Uh-oh!” I heard him exclaim upon spying his former Valkyrie attendant. He swiftly fled the scene.

At this unexpected development, Rossweisse howled, “You’re in for it now! Waaaaiiiit! You old nincompoop! Who’s that new Valkyrie?! Odiiiiin!”

Rossweisse activated her armor and chased after the elderly Norse deity.

“Issei, Yuuto, Xenovia... Go and stop her, please,” the prez said with an exasperated sigh.

Our climactic match was mere hours away, yet our brief hotel stay was just as hectic.

We were led to a private waiting room. However, it was more like an entire hotel floor, complete with tables—each adorned with tea and snacks. There was training equipment for some last-minute exercise, too.

This space had practically everything. Those of us who would be engaging in physical combat, myself included, had already changed into our tracksuits to do some light warm-ups.

If we didn’t start loosening our muscles now, we wouldn’t be able to fight at our best. We had six hours to go—time enough to get in a simple workout and relax.

I wasted no time getting to it.

“Excuse me,” came the voice of a man entering the room.

I know that face! It can’t be!

“Riser!”

“Brother!”

The prez and Ravel replied to this latest arrival with surprise.

Yep, our visitor was none other than Riser Phenex.

“Yo, I thought I’d drop in. You look good, Ravel,” he said as he took a seat.

So Riser’s here to watch our Rating Game, too, huh? It looked like he was finally back on his feet. For a while, the shock of losing to me had prompted him to withdraw from society.

Had he come to check in on us? I couldn't help but wonder. Evidently, the others were pondering the same question.

Akeno poured Riser a cup of tea.

"I wanted to talk to you all about your match," he began after taking a drink. "This game is attracting just as much attention as a professional one. In fact, it's basically being conducted as though it *were* a professional one. There will be a full audience, and you're going to have to fight with everyone scrutinizing your every move. That can make it *seem* like a show and not a real fight, and I know that's a little unsettling. But it's a big stage. The more power you show, the better the reception you'll get. This is a critical moment for you, Rias. You got that?"

Riser's tone was serious. Here I was thinking that he had come to poke fun at us, but I was completely mistaken. He wanted to give us some words of advice as a professional Rating Game contestant.

The prez frowned. "...I'm not the strategist Sona is, and I don't have Sairaorg's raw strength. I know I'm blessed to have everyone in this Familia, but that's why I'm so annoyed at myself. I don't have what it takes to be the best leader for them....," she confessed.

Was that what was bothering her?

The prez was my master, but she was also a teenage girl. She'd been putting on a brave front, but no doubt our upcoming match had filled her with anxiety.

"You can get better at strategy and improve your strength with a little something I hate—effort," Riser replied. "But you know what, Rias? Your habit of finding and recruiting the right talent—that's something else. The way I see it, you've got *that* to thank for building such a good Familia."

"Issei is the Red Dragon Emperor. I'm sure his dragon powers played a big part in attracting everyone."

"And it was *your* destiny to meet the Red Dragon Emperor. Something about *you* brought the two of you together in the first place. That's why you found him. After that, his dragon qualities might have helped call in the others, but you're the one who set everything in motion," Riser said categorically. "Hold

your head up high, Rias. These guys are your treasures.”

—.

Riser... What a generous thing to say! I was impressed! Maybe he wasn’t such an evil-hearted pretty boy after all!

Perhaps he felt embarrassed to say all that, because he scratched his cheek before continuing. “I’m a veteran, so believe me when I say this. You’re already at a professional level yourselves. Heck, you’ve got what it takes to climb to the top. If we were to have ourselves a rematch, you would beat the living daylight out of me. As would Bael and his Familia. They’re strong, too. Seriously, what’s with your generation?”

Having said all he cared to, Riser stood from his chair and started for the entrance. “I’ll be rooting for you, Rias. Make sure you win.”

The prez broke out into a brilliant smile at those encouraging words. “Yes, of course,” she said with a forceful nod.

It looked like another weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Evidently, Kings had a lot to worry about...

It was their responsibility to carry the fates of all their servants, to lead them into battle...

Was that what it meant to be a high-class demon...?

“Red Dragon Emperor,” Riser called out to me, raising his fist into the air. “Your fists... I’ll never forget that blow you dealt me. Use that punch to aim for the top... Let’s have a rematch sometime—and don’t keep me waiting. Face me in the ring, and I’ll show you what it takes to be a pro in a pro’s world.”

“...Y-yeah! Of course! I’ll fight you again in an official game! And I’ll win!”

That thought filled me with raw excitement. Obviously, I wanted a second chance at beating him properly!

Riser glanced at his younger sister. “And take care of Ravel for me. She’s just as spoiled and headstrong as Rias, but she’s the earnest type. If you make her cry, I’ll burn you. Got it?”

“Th-that’s none of your business!” Ravel cried, her face bright red.

“Maybe I’ve lost my edge.” Riser chuckled in self-derision. Then he left.

He’d come all this way to cheer us on, to offer words of encouragement...

Thanks to him, I was ready to face Sairaorg with all my heart and soul.

I thought words of thanks to Riser. Yet no sooner had I done so than the door opened again, and he returned.

“Right, I almost forgot. Red Dragon Emperor, Sirzechs asked me to give you a message. He wants to see you in the VIP room. Says he has something to show you.”

What could Sirzechs want?

I tilted my head to one side in bewilderment and set off alone for the VIP room.



I stepped foot into a spacious room glittering with all manner of luxurious furniture and goods.

“Sorry to bother you before your match, Issei,” Sirzechs greeted cheerfully.

“It’s no problem. What did you want to show me?”

“Well, it’s something a passionate fan of yours sent. Do take a look.” Sirzechs retrieved what looked like a video disc and inserted it into the playback device connected to the TV.

“A disc? Is it a video or something?” I asked.

Sirzechs nodded as he switched on the display. “Indeed. A video letter.”

The image of a young boy holding an action figure of me in my Balance Breaker form appeared on the screen. It was a home video.

The boy bravely spoke into the camera. *“Hello, Breast Dragon. I love you, Breast Dragon. I know your song by heart. I can’t go to the stadium for your match, but I’ll cheer for you from home. Please win.”*

—.

It’s a kind of fan letter...

The video cut to a new scene of two young siblings running around their

house.

“Breast Dragon! Win! Squishy, squishy squish!”

“Breasts!”

The next scene was of another kid with his parents. He had figures of the Switch Princess and me.

“I’m cheering for the Breast Dragon and the Switch Princess. I can’t go to watch, but I really, really want you to win!”

The video was filled with children offering me their support.

Clip after clip played in succession, each one showing children sending me messages of encouragement. I was overcome with emotion.

To think that they care about me that much...

“The match today is going to be broadcast all throughout the underworld. There will be a lot of children watching from home.” Sirzechs brought over a cardboard box from the other side of the room, placing it in my hands.

It was filled with fan letters from young kids, all written in clumsy demon script. Each of them included a rather rough attempt at drawing my likeness, but I could see that the children had poured all their effort into these messages.

Every last one of them was heartfelt and unique.

As my hands trembled with joy, Sirzechs said, “Those kids...are the future of the underworld. You might have heard there are a lot of adults playing politics behind the scenes today, but you don’t need to worry about them. I want to ask you a favor, Issei. I know you’ll be fighting for your own dreams, but won’t you fight for these children, too? I’m sorry to make a selfish request of you. But I’d be grateful if you would strive to defend the dreams of these kids.”

Protecting the dreams of children.

It was another important facet of today’s Rating Game.

“Got it. I’m the Breast Dragon, after all.”

My name is Issei Hyoudou, the present Red Dragon Emperor. On top of that, I’m also the Breast Dragon Emperor.

A lot would be riding on me emotionally during this fight. I would have to enter it with a different mindset than when we fought Riser or the Sitri Familia.

For me, the prez, my friends, and all the children cheering me on...

Let's go, Ddraig.

We had a lot of work to do, but what I wanted to achieve was simple.

"Understood, partner."

I vowed not to let anyone down. I would reward their faith with victory!



With the match due to begin momentarily, we found ourselves waiting in the long corridor leading up to the entrance gate inside the Agreas Dome. Light from inside the stadium flooded the hallway while cheers echoed from the distance.

Our battle attire was our usual Kuou Academy uniforms—although they were a little different this time.

They had been specially treated for the battle to be heat and cold resistant, bulletproof, and to have heightened magical defenses.

Truthfully, it wasn't a huge increase in protection, but at the very least, these uniforms beat our usual clothes.

Xenovia, for her part, was dressed in her usual battle outfit, which had also been improved.

Rosswisse was garbed in her Valkyrie armor. It seemed that helped her relax.

Asia was wearing her nun outfit, which had become her regular Rating Game uniform. It, too, had received the same improvements.

As we counted down the final minutes before stepping into the ring, the prez spoke up: "...This isn't a real-life battle, everyone. It's a Rating Game. However, it is no less important than a true fight. People will be watching your every move, but don't let that weigh you down."

"The battle of the century is about to begin! Entering now from the east gate, we have Sairaorg Bael's team!"

“““Whhhhhooooooooooooo!”””

A deafening cheer erupted, the entire dome shaking from the force of the crowd's excitement.

“...I’m scared!” Gasper cried out.

“It’ll be okay. They say it’s easier if you imagine the audience’s faces as pumpkins,” Koneko answered, trying to soothe him.

Pumpkins? That exchange seemed strangely characteristic of them both.

“Xenovia? Is it true Irina’s going to be the chief cheerleader on our side?”

“Yep, that’s right, Asia. She said she was going to set up base in the part of the grandstand reserved for Breast Dragon fans.”

Irina had taken on a role like that? Ravel had mentioned her seat was in that area, too. Those two must have decided to watch together.

"And now, entering through the west gate, we have Rias Gremory's team!"

—!

That was our announcement.

“““Whhhhhooooooooooooo!”””

The audience was already fired up.

I was so nervous! My heart was racing! We all did our best to put our feelings aside and keep our faces resolute.

The prez looked back at us one final time. “Thank you for sticking with me this far. It’s time to go now, my servants! Let’s win this!”

""""""""""Yes!"""""""""" we shouted in unison.

And so we stepped through the gate...

With applause raining down from every direction, we stared up at two floating islands hovering above the vast oval-shaped arena. Between you and me, they looked more like massive boulders suspended in midair than anything else.

The Bael Familia was already assembled atop one of those islands.

“Now, Team Gremory, please approach your designated starting position,” the announcer requested.

Our base was on *that...*? Sure enough, there was a long spiral staircase leading to the top. We followed the path until we reached the peak.

I spied the Bael Familia in the distance... Surely, we weren't expected to make use of this whole field and fight in midair? Maybe we were expected to roam freely across the arena, while the team that destroyed the other group's base first would win?

Inside our base was a chair for each of us, plus a mysterious pedestal. The only other object of note was what looked like a teleportation-type magic circle on a higher level.

It appeared that the other team's base was equipped the same way.

Down below, I could make out something like an athletics track... We weren't supposed to go down there for a race, were we...?

Just what sort of game was this?

While I stood puzzling, another announcement blared, and a flamboyantly dressed man wearing an earpiece suddenly appeared on a huge display looming over the field!

“Greetings, one and all! Tonight's play-by-play is brought to you by me, Naud Gamigin, formerly of the House of Gamigin among the Seventy-Two Pillars!”

The audience erupted in applause! Was this a live commentary?! Awesome! It really *was* no different from a professional Rating Game!

“And the arbiter for tonight's match will be Rudiger Rosenkreutz!”

A magic circle opened up in the sky, from which a handsome guy in some kind of uniform appeared! His long silver hair waved gently, and the women in the audience erupted in excited shrieks!

“...Rudiger Rosenkreutz. A reincarnated demon and former human, now ultimate-class. He's ranked seventh overall...,” Koneko whispered.

—! So he used to be human?! And despite that, he's now an ultimate-class demon and one of the highest-ranked?! A single-digit one at that?! As a former

human who dreamed of climbing to the top, I was struck with admiration!

Hold on, what does it say about our fight if someone that important is gonna manage the match?!

“So it isn’t Grayfia this time?” I said quietly.

She’d overseen all our previous bouts.

“The House of Bael would never have agreed to that,” Akeno pointed out under her breath. “Grayfia is connected to the Gremorys, after all.”

Now that she mentioned it, that did make sense. Grayfia was Sirzechs’s Queen. Considering how much emphasis the House of Bael’s supporters placed on rank, they certainly wouldn’t have gone along with such an arrangement. Grayfia wasn’t the type to show favoritism when refereeing, but the other side would undoubtedly mistrust her.

“And our special guest, who will provide us with expert analysis—please welcome Azazel, the governor of the fallen angels! It’s a pleasure to meet you, Governor!”

At that moment, a familiar face appeared on the display.

...

We watched in mute astonishment as the figure—Azazel—looked into the camera with a broad grin.

“Hi there. My pleasure. I’m Azazel. It’s great to be here.”

...T-T-T-Teeeeeaaaaach?!

What was going on here?! When he said he wouldn’t be going to the VIP room on account of having some special work to do, was *this* what he’d meant?! He’d been planning on commentating for the match?! Why hadn’t he said anything?! None of us anticipated this development!

Ignorant of our shock, the announcer continued with his introduction. *“Governor Azazel. You’re famous for being on good terms with the leaders of all the major powers, starting with our very own Sirzechs Lucifer. However, you’re just as well-known for being one of the leading experts in the study of Sacred Gears. Having coached Rias Gremory’s team for today’s match, what do you*

think the audience should keep an eye out for?”

“Personally, in terms of whether both teams will demonstrate their full potential—”

With a sly grin, Azazel began a breakdown analysis!

Once that introduction was over, the camera moved to a figure sitting by Teach: a gray-haired, gray-eyed man with clean-cut features.

One look was enough to confirm the identity of that celebrated figure.

“And our last guest, the Rating Game’s very own number one! Our reigning champion and emperor of combat, Diehauser Belial!”

“Whhhhooooooooooooooooooooo!”

That earned the loudest cheer from the crowd yet. It was even more deafening than when Azazel had appeared. Even the floating island where we stood trembled from the incredible volume.

The man—the emperor of the Rating Game—spoke in a clear voice. *“Greetings, everyone. Diehauser Belial here. Today, I’ll be offering my thoughts on the match between the Houses of Gremory and Bael.”*

I burned his visage into my retinas.

The supreme champion of the Rating Game. The emperor. The number one.

I wasn’t sure why, but a shiver coursed through my flesh. I wasn’t scared. It was more like a tremor of excitement, I guess.

I now had a clear mental picture of a goal that had remained hazy and indistinct for so long.

“I’m sure this is sudden, but perhaps we could hear a few pointers from Governor Azazel, who coached Team Gremory, and our reigning champion, who advised Team Bael,” the announcer said.

“Well, when it comes to the Gremory team, you have to start with the Breast Dragon and the Switch Princess! Then...” Azazel launched into a thoughtful reply.

“Yes, I do believe Sairaorg is an excellent King. But more importantly, his level

of power makes him the strongest member of his team..." Emperor Belial likewise explained his thoughts.

The prez watched with a stern expression. "Diehauser Belial..."

The reigning champion was also the prez's future opponent. Her dream was to win every Rating Game title there was, and if she was to do so, then her final hurdle was that man on the screen.

Determination filled her expression. "One day... For now, I need to concentrate on the opponent in front of me. If I don't, I won't get very far."

I couldn't have said it better myself! We needed to focus on Sairaorg! We could put Emperor Belial to one side for the time being! The problem was how to defeat our present foe and his Familia!

We had to adjust our attitudes! There was no way we would be able to win if we divided our attention!

I patted myself on the face to get centered.

"First of all, let's talk about Phoenix Tears," the announcer said.

Ah! Phoenix Tears! We weren't supposed to know whether or not we would receive any until the last minute, so I couldn't help but wonder what the decision was.

The prez had been rather worried about that—Phoenix Tears would have a major impact on our strategy.

"As I'm sure our viewers know, demand for Phoenix Tears has been soaring with the Khaos Brigade's continued terrorist attacks, and prices have skyrocketed. As a result, they aren't easy to come by right now. That being said..." The announcer pointed toward an overly large monitor showing the image of two small vials in an expensive-looking box. *"Thanks to the generosity of the head of the House of Phenex, the principal manufacturer and distributor of Phoenix Tears, and the support for both teams today, each side will be granted a small supply of their own!"*

""""Whhhhhooooooooooooo!""""

The stadium exploded with excited cries.

So we *would* be getting some Phoenix Tears. As I thought on it, I remembered that Ravel had mentioned something about this earlier.

“The whole underworld is looking forward to this match, so I’d like to help out if I can.”

Thanks, Ravel! Unfortunately, this meant the other side would be able to revive a fallen fighter, too.

“It looks like we’re going to have to defeat Sairaorg Bael twice,” Kiba remarked, his expression grim.

Right. The other side would definitely save their tears for Sairaorg.

Not only was he his Familia’s King, he was also their strongest fighter, so keeping him alive was pure necessity. It was practically a given that the vial was reserved for him.

Which meant we would have to beat him two times... We would have to force him to use his Phoenix Tears while hardly taking any damage ourselves... As dimwitted as I was, even I knew we wouldn’t be able to force his hand without casualties.

That being the case, the next question was which of us would use our supply of tears. Fortunately, we already had a healer in Asia, so the tears were of comparatively less importance to our tactics.

Nonetheless, we couldn’t afford to overlook their potential to heal instantly. Phoenix Tears would be our only option if Asia wasn’t close enough to cast her aura in time. Most importantly, we had to make sure that the prez, as our King, survived to the end. It made the most sense to keep them for her, should she end up in immediate danger.

My mind was racing as I turned over these new variables, when the announcer came out with the information I’d been anticipating the most.

“There will also be a special rule for tonight’s game!”

A special rule! I knew it! I understood that the organizers wouldn’t do anything to restrain our powers or abilities, but still... Given how many people would be watching for entertainment, the decision-makers undoubtedly

wanted to spice things up.

“But before we explain the supplemental rules, let’s go over the general flow of the game! The rules this time are a little different from usual. Instead of having our contestants fight all at once across the field, this match will be a series of individual trials! We’re aiming for a short blitz-style contest, and we want to keep everyone’s excitement at maximum! This may be an unranked contest between up-and-coming youths, but it will be run like a professional match!”

—! So we wouldn’t be freely roaming the field?! I hadn’t participated in a game like this before!

Judging by their stern expressions, the others clearly hadn’t anticipated this development, either. If the bout was to be divided into separate rounds, did that render a team battle out of the question? We did spend some time practicing for individual fights, but we’d focused so much on coordinating as a team. Was all that experience about to go to waste?

“Now for the special rules! Will our two Kings please proceed to the pedestals installed in their respective bases?”

Pedestals? Ah, right. I’d been wondering what those were for.

The prez and Sairaorg, from way across the battlefield, moved in front of their respective pedestals, as instructed.

Some kind of mechanical contraption began to emerge from the stands.

The scene was projected on the giant screen overhead. Rising from each podium...was a die! Today was just full of surprises!

“In front of each team’s King is a throwing die! These items are key to our special rules! Yes, today’s match will be structured around one of the most popular events featured in the Rating Game—Dice Figures!”

Dice...Figures? I tilted my head to one side in bafflement at this unfamiliar term.

Fortunately, Kiba explained, whispering, “Dice Figures... Full-fledged Rating Games utilize varying combinations of special rules. So far, our previous

matches have all been relatively straightforward in that respect. However, there are times like today when dice play an important role, or when we might need to fight for a number of flags set up across the field—that one's called Scramble Flags, by the way."

I had no idea matches could be structured like this. I'd need to bone up on Rating Game rules later. There sure was a lot of depth...

"To those who might be unfamiliar with Dice Figures, a brief explanation! The dice allocated to each team are both regular six-sided dice and will land on a number from one to six when thrown. The rolls will determine the contestants who participate in each round!"

So our opponents would be decided by luck...? Our fate was up to the dice?!

"In the human game of chess, each piece is said to have a different value based on its strength on the chessboard. Pawns serve as the base value, at one point. And it's no different for the Evil Pieces system used in the Rating Game. Of course, there are times when these standard values might be exceeded, such as when a contestant demonstrates more power than their assumed potential. Plus, Ajuka Beelzebub has hidden certain bonus features in some pieces! For this match, however, we'll be using the standard values associated with each piece!"

So that was how this worked. The prez had given me a quick primer when I'd first been reincarnated as a demon: Knights and Bishops were worth three points, Rooks five, and Queens nine.

But those were just the standard values of each piece. There were members in our Familia who didn't exactly conform to those numbers, like Kiba, who'd unlocked his Balance Breaker, or Gasper with his mutation piece.

"First, both our Kings will roll, and the sum value will determine which of their Familia members can enter the round! For instance, let's say the sum turns out to be eight! In that case, our Kings can send in any combination of contestants up to or equal to that number! Pawns are worth one point each, so they could potentially send in eight of them! Knights are worth three, so they could nominate two each! So long as the sum is within the total value, any combination of Pieces can be used! Note here that anyone who required multiple Evil Pieces to be recruited will be worth that many points! In the case of

Team Gremory, Issei Hyoudou, the Red Dragon Emperor, was recruited for eight Pawn pieces, so that's the minimum roll necessary to send him into play!"

In that case, the maximum possible sum of two dice rolls would be twelve, and if that were the result, our side would have to send out some combination of members within that number. That would leave us with, for example, Akeno as our Queen, being worth nine points, along with one Knight or Bishop.

And I was worth eight points? That was a fairly high number, and it would severely limit who I could be paired with. Given that the highest possible roll was twelve, I couldn't be paired with a Rook, as that would push us over the maximum. Maybe my best option would be to fight alongside Kiba or Xenovia, one of our Knights?

But what would happen if both teams rolled a low number?

Just as the question occurred to me, the announcer clarified, *"However, neither Rias Gremory nor Sairaorg Bael possesses any pieces worth one or two points. Both sides will only be able to nominate contestants if the sum of both rolls is three or more. In other words, if both sides roll a one, we'll simply have to get them both to roll again!"*

In that case, what would happen if we ended up losing members? Would the prez and Sairaorg have to keep rolling until they landed on a number equal to at least one of their remaining servants?

"Furthermore, as the match progresses, the number of contestants on hand will naturally decrease. If one or both sides doesn't have any pieces whose value falls within the sum of the dice roll, both leaders will have to roll again until they do!"

Ah. Well, that did make sense. In that case, how were the two Kings themselves supposed to participate?

"As for our two Kings, they have been evaluated by the judging committee and assigned fixed values. Naturally, the match will end automatically if a King is defeated!"

That...would be a problem. Depending on the outcome of the dice roll, Sairaorg himself could enter the fray!

He was stronger than the prez and undoubtedly the best member of his entire Familia.

Depending on the outcome of each throw, if he was to keep entering each round himself, he would be able to whittle away at any chance we might have to secure victory!

“What does it mean that the Kings have been assigned values by the judging committee?” I wondered.

“Exactly what the announcer said. The judging committee will estimate how many pieces the president and Sairaorg Bael are worth,” Akeno explained. “Whether or not they can participate will depend on those numbers. The judges will consider each King’s individual strength, the values of their Familia members, and how they compare to their opponents. For that reason, I would expect those numbers to change as the match progresses.”

Leave it to Akeno to pick up on what I missed. Ultimately, it sounded like the judging committee decided how much the prez and Sairaorg were worth.

“Now then, let’s see what values the judging committee has selected for our two Kings!”

As the announcer spoke, the prez’s and Sairaorg’s names appeared on the display above the field, the numbers below each cycling rapidly through the different options.

Finally, with a dramatic sound, the numbers came to a stop at the final values.

“Sairaorg Bael will be worth twelve points! Rias Gremory will be worth eight! Now, this is interesting! Sairaorg has a higher number, but that also means he won’t be able to compete himself unless both Kings roll the highest possible values!”

So for our current match, the prez’s point score was lower than Sairaorg’s... It was one point lower than Akeno’s and equal to mine. However, if I understood Akeno’s explanation correctly, those values weren’t absolute and could change depending on how the fight played out.

“...I’ll just have to make up for it during the match, then,” the prez declared.

Knowing her, she was probably disappointed that she'd been given a lower value than Sairaorg, but all the same, she was surprisingly calm about it.

If you stopped to think about it, a high roll meant she'd be able to team up with one of our Knights or Bishops! Yep, it was best to put a positive spin on this. If we played this right, we'd have more options at our disposal than Sairaorg, seeing as he would only be able to fight alone, and only then with the best possible roll.

"Does that mean Sairaorg will enter as soon as both teams roll a twelve?" I asked.

Kiba's expression was conflicted. "Not necessarily. Especially not in the opening rounds."

"Why not?"

"Even if he wins, his evaluation could drop slightly depending on what happens. One-person teams don't tend to get highly rated, after all. It's through using your team members to the fullest that you get the best score in Rating Games. Not only that, but the media would go crazy if he tried to fight alone so early on, which could put his future as a King in jeopardy. Plus, this is being broadcast live. A brash move in front of such a large audience would surely damage his reputation. Winning is important, but appearances are no less vital here. Anyway, seeing as we're playing Dice Figures, and he'll need a twelve just to come out, he won't be able to enter the fray that easily."

If all that had to be taken into account, then real ranked matches would by no means be straightforward... You couldn't afford to ignore how your actions impacted your public image, or else you risked damaging your future prospects... Life in the professional world sounded terrifying...

"And we have one further rule. The same contestants can't be entered into two consecutive rounds. That goes for our Kings as well!"

Got it. So none of us would be fighting twice without a breather in between. Sairaorg wouldn't be fighting nonstop, either.

"Even if the total of the first dice roll is a twelve, I don't think Sairaorg will nominate himself," the prez said. "Knowing him, he'll want to have his Familia

members compete as a team first. No doubt they've all been training hard for this. However, he *will* want to join at some point. It will all depend on the result of the dice throws, but he'll definitely fight us himself. He's a battle maniac, after all."

The prez could read him that well? I bet everyone was trying to anticipate the enemy's actions after hearing the additional rules...

The prez turned to Asia. "With these rules, sending you out by yourself or in a team would be a bad idea, Asia. The other side will aim to take you out first, seeing as you're our healer. It will be better for us to keep you here so you can tend to those of us who come back. Not having to rely solely on Phoenix Tears is a huge advantage. I'm sorry, Asia. I can't send you into the match. Please just heal those who manage to return. It's an incredibly vital role for us right now."

Asia showed no sign of displeasure at these instructions and flashed the prez a smile. "Of course, Rias. I'll be here to treat everyone's injuries! Please, just come back safely!"

"""""""Of course!"""""""" we answered in unison.

It sounded like the prez's rating could take a hit if Asia was to compete directly.

"The other side will undoubtedly have guessed that Asia won't take part personally," Kiba observed.

The prez nodded. "Yes. Which means we have eight possible combatants in total."

Eight! That didn't sound half bad! And now that we knew Asia had our backs, I felt more confident about going all out. Not that I intended to do anything reckless... Not even Asia or the Phoenix Tears could replenish my expended stamina and energy.

"Now then, it's time for the start of this fateful Rating Game! Both teams, are you ready?" the announcer called.

The next moment, the arbiter raised his hand into the air. *"The Rating Game between Sairaorg Bael's and Rias Gremory's Familias will now commence! Begin!"*

Cheers thundered through the stadium—and the battle began at last!



“Will both Kings please approach the pedestals?”

Following the arbiter’s instructions, both the prez and Sairaorg stepped before the raised daises where they were to roll their respective dice.

“Let us begin the first round. We will start by deciding your respective entrants. Will both Kings please now pick up the dice?”

The prez raised hers into the air.

I was getting nervous. What numbers would come up? There could be no guessing whether the value would be large or small ahead of time.

“Go!”

On the arbiter’s instruction, both Kings threw their dice!

The dice rolled across the tops of the pedestals before finally coming to a stop...

The outcome was projected onto the display up above.

“Rias Gremory has rolled...a two! Sairaorg Bael, on the other hand, has rolled a one! That gives us a total of three! As such, both sides will now have to nominate entrants equal to that value! As both teams’ Pawns are worth more than that, they will have to send out either one Knight or one Bishop! Who will they choose?!”

The announcer’s voice was ringing with enthusiasm.

Hold on, three?! So we had landed on the smallest playable outcome right from the get-go?! Was this even possible?!

“Both teams will have five minutes to prepare. Please select your contestant for this round during that time. Note also that Pawns can use a Promotion upon reaching the field. That Promotion will be deactivated after each round, so please use a new one each time.”

Five minutes... Already, the countdown was underway. Immediately, a mysterious barrier surrounded both teams’ home bases.

“It’s a soundproof field. It’s to prevent anyone from overhearing us while we strategize,” Kiba explained. “The broadcasters will also cover our faces with a special mark to stop anyone from reading our lips.”

I glanced up at the overhead display... Whoa! Our faces had been overlaid with a symbol resembling the magic circles used by our Familia!

So that’s to prevent anyone from knowing what we’re saying? This pro-style match was just full of surprises.

As we took our seats, the prez looked at each of us in turn. “The other team is likely expecting that we’ll send out Yuuto.”

“Wh-why is that?” I asked.

It was Kiba himself who answered, holding up four fingers. “Because the sum of the roll was three, we only have four possible choices: me, Xenovia, Asia, or Gasper. Asia and Gasper are support-type fighters, so we wouldn’t send them out alone, right? They work best in the rearguard, supporting someone else fighting up close.”

“...So you’re saying our only real options are you and Xenovia? And the reason they would assume it would be you...?”

The prez took over from there. “Xenovia is a Power-type Knight, and since her opponent would have to be either another Knight or a Bishop, she would be highly susceptible to a Counter-type technique...”

Xenovia nodded. “Yeah. I would have a hard time winning without taking a few hits. Not that I plan to let a Technique-type fighter get the better of me,” she said confidently.



“Even if she was to win, there’s a good chance she could end up revealing the Ex-Durendal,” the prez noted. “A single ability could expose its upgrades. We need to keep that up our sleeve until later in the match. I expect the later rounds, when we roll higher, to be particularly fierce. It would be a waste to reveal the Ex-Durendal now, so we should keep Xenovia in reserve until then. That’s why it has to be Yuuto. We need someone capable of fighting in a range of conditions whose abilities are already well-known. That’s Yuuto, not Xenovia.”

The prez was right. Even if our opponents already knew about Kiba’s Holy Demon Swords, he was capable of shifting to fit the situation. Xenovia’s Durendal Cannon (as I had taken to calling it) required time to charge, and because it wasn’t particularly fast, an opponent could stop it in its tracks or outright evade. There was no doubt about it—Kiba was the better choice.

If Xenovia went out, she would probably exhaust herself and get beat up for her trouble...

“Hmph. Issei, are you thinking I’m completely clueless?” Xenovia demanded, her tone accusatory.

I curled my lips in a forced smile and shook my head.

To be honest, I *did* think she could be a little reckless at times. She was definitely more daring than I was, that was for sure! She’d rushed in without warning during the fights against Loki and the Hero Faction!

“I have to go, even if they already know my abilities. I *am* going,” Kiba stated, taking a step forward as he fixed his collar.

“Don’t lose in the first round, you hear me?” I said lightly.

I wasn’t expecting him to go down easy. Being Kiba’s sparring partner, I knew just how strong he was.

“Of course I’ll win,” he replied with his perfect pretty boy smile!

“The five minutes of preparation time are over,” the announcer stated. *“Would our nominated combatants please make their way to their magic circles? Once you enter, you will be transported to a battlefield in an alternative*

dimension. The first round will take place there. Several battlefields have been prepared ahead of time, and your destination will be randomly selected from among them. Furthermore, until the combatants have entered the ring, both teams' home bases will be shielded behind invisibility barriers. Those wards will only be lifted once all contestants are present on the battlefield."

Ah, so the magic circle was for sending us to the various arenas that had each been prepared in alternate dimensions. So these floating islands wouldn't be the main stage?

Hold on, we won't be able to see into the other side's home base until Kiba's gone? What does that mean?

Koneko, having all but read my mind, explained, "...The invisibility ward prevents us from changing which piece we're sending after seeing the other team's choice. If one team could swap their piece, the other team would follow suit, and it would loop like that forever. We're also being watched to make sure we don't do anything against the rules."

That did sound like it could be a hassle. In other words, we wouldn't know who Kiba's opponent would be until the round started.

And to think that we were being monitored here... Was there a hidden camera somewhere? With all these anti-cheating measures, I couldn't even think up a way to break the rules.

There was still so much I didn't know! Even Koneko understood it all better than I did! I really needed to brush up on my studies! Once this match was over, I was going to hit the books and read up on all the different game types!

"I suspect that another reason they keep the fighters' identities concealed is to build excitement," Rossweisse observed.

As we spoke, the barrier surrounding our home base thickened, cutting us off from the outside.

"I'll be off, then," Kiba said through his earpiece from atop the magic circle. The array let out a brilliant flash of light, and he vanished from view.

Next, a series of images appeared projected into the air above our base. One of them showed the audience watching in expectation.

The biggest, however, showed a vast green plain. Kiba appeared in the middle of the grassland. Nearby, an armored knight, riding atop a horse and radiating blue-white flames, arrived!

“Whoa! Both contestants have entered the battlefield! As you can see, they will be fighting atop this expansive plain! This verdant field will be the site of our first round! As for our two fighters... We have the Gremory Familia’s swift-footed princely scion, Yuuto Kiba! Rias Gremory’s Knight has entered the fray!”

“““Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek! Kibaaaaa!”””

A huge number of women in the audience, the flames of their enthusiasm fanned by the announcer, broke out into frenzied cheers.

Ugh... Our pretty boy was seriously popular with girls... Damn him! Why did *he* have to steal all the attention?! He should’ve at least let me ride his coattails!

“And from the Bael Familia...”

Before the announcer could finish with his introduction, the armored knight trotted into view on horseback, removing the mask that shielded his face.

I recognized him at once—he’d played a central role during Sairaorg’s match against Zephyrdor Glasya-Labolas.

It was Sairaorg’s Knight.

“I am Beruga Furas, one of two Knights in the service of my lord, Sairaorg Bael!”

What a perfect self-introduction!

“The House of Furas is well-known for their steeds,” the prez remarked.

So horses were their specialty? That explained his mount.

“Greetings. I’m Rias Gremory’s Knight, Yuuto Kiba,” Kiba called out in turn.

Furas lifted his conical-shaped lance, pointing it up to the heavens. *“...My lord has bestowed on me great fortune, granting me this opportunity to cross blades with the famous Yuuto Kiba and his Holy Demon Swords.”*

“I look forward to fighting you, too,” Kiba replied dauntlessly.

“Governor Azazel, what can you tell us about that horse enveloped in blue

flames?” the announcer asked.

“It’s a Pale Horse, a high-level creature that dwells in Cocytus, the deepest layer of Hell. They’re said to have been the mounts of famous demons and grim reapers for generations and are seen as harbingers of death and destruction. They aren’t easy creatures to tame. By nature, they’re inherently violent and will attempt to kick anyone who incurs their wrath to death, potentially even their masters.”

Thanks for the explanation, Teach! Seriously, it sounded like Azazel had found his natural calling in his new commentator position.

“My beloved steed, Altobrau, can run with the speed of the divine. Master Kiba, I look forward to our contest.” Furcas was already prepared for battle.

Azazel had informed us of the dangers posed by that horse, and it would only be worse if its rider was in sync with it!

The arbiter appeared on the battlefield, positioned in between the two combatants.

“Let the first round begin!”

With that signal, both Kiba and Furcas put some distance between each other.

Our Rating Game against Sairaorg Bael’s Familia was underway! And Kiba was the star of the opening act!

Give him hell, Kibaaaaa!

“Let us see if you can match Altobrau’s fleetness of foot!”

“Neeeeeeiiiigh!”

Both rider and steed cried out at once, then disappeared!

“You’re fast!”

Kiba certainly had that right! Having trained alongside him for so long, I was used to tracking swift opponents, but this was something else. That dash was incredible.

Not to be outdone, Kiba followed his opponent with his eyes—no, with his sense of intuition—and braced himself with a Holy Demon Sword.

Cliiiiing! Clash!

The sound of metal crashing against metal rang out. Kiba, remaining fixed to his starting position, warded off the barrage of oncoming attacks.

Next, he took a step back and took off at an incredible speed the second he sensed his opponent's location.

Ching! Clang!

Both fighters were moving so quickly they could only be seen during those brief moments when they collided, their weapons clashing against each other with grating metallic sounds and bursts of sparks.

Deep gashes formed in the battlefield from the countless waves of force emanating from Kiba's swords and Furcas's lance.

I could spot the two only when their attacks collided. That was my limit. That was how fast they both were!

Before long, they appeared again, their weapons interlocked as they pushed against each other.

"You've managed to match my Altobrau in speed... You're a fearsome one, Knight of Lady Rias!" Furcas said with a resolute laugh.

"And you, you work in expert lockstep with your horse. If I was to try to cut down your mount, your lance would stop me in my tracks. You leave me no choice but to destroy the ground on which you stand!" Kiba responded.

As his gaze sharpened, a barrage of Holy Demon Swords burst out from the earth around him, layer upon layer, like a flower coming into bloom!

That had to be enough to pin down that Pale Horse!

I rejoiced at what I saw—only for Furcas's steed to leap high into the air!

Can that creature run through the sky, too?!

Kiba followed through with his attack, unconcerned that his target was above him!

"Holy Demon Sword of Thunder!"

The heavens lit up, and lightning came crashing down toward Furcas! Kiba had

learned this technique from Akeno! It wasn't quite as strong as her signature attacks, but it was still a deadly barrage!

"I think not!"

Furcas cast his lance into the sky, using it as a lightning rod to absorb the attack. Having discarded his weapon, he reached with his now-empty hand into his horse's fiery mane as though to retrieve something. The flames of his Pale Horse rippled through the air, as if connecting to some distant dimension.

When he drew back, he was gripping a new lance. So he had more of them?

Our opponents had researched Kiba's abilities well. Furcas had warded off every last one of his strikes.

Kiba's weapons were his Holy Demon Swords, imbued with holy light. A direct hit spelled serious damage for a demon. As such, if Furcas hoped to win, he had to ensure that he didn't take a single blow.

That was easier said than done, however. Only a truly formidable opponent would be capable of fending off Kiba unscathed.

Most enemies would find themselves falling victim to his blades on the very first move. Yet that hadn't happened.

So this was Sairaorg's first play? Even his first servant was this formidable?

"Your Holy Demon Swords may pose lethal consequences to a demon such as I, but even so..." Furcas braced himself. He was clearly up to something! *"It's all for naught if you can't land a hit!"*

He darted into action, and both he and his horse multiplied! Was it an illusion, or was he actually duplicating himself?!

Kiba was faced now with a horde of oncoming Furcas apparitions. His sword arm looked stiff, and his expression was stern.

Don't tell me he can't work out which of them is real! If Kiba couldn't tell them apart, those apparitions had to have the appearance and presence of the genuine article!

The multiple visages of Furcas took off at high speed, circling Kiba and striking from all directions.

At first, Kiba managed to hold them off with his swords, but he couldn't withstand those endless attacks forever, and it wasn't long before he took damage!

"Ugh!"

He swung his Holy Demon Swords once more, combining two blades together to create an explosive burst with his aura. The surrounding grass was blown away by the force of the maneuver, but Furcas deftly evaded the attack, falling back.

That was fine. Kiba's technique had been intended purely to force his opponent to retreat.

Furcas dispelled the illusions, leaving only his true self.

Kiba caught his breath, flashing his foe an indomitable grin. *"...I didn't want to show my hand so early in the game...but you'll whittle me down if I keep holding back. Guess I won't be able to chide Xenovia about being reckless anymore..."*

His voice was tinged with self-derision.

Was he planning to use *that* already? Honestly, this was probably the best time to bust it out. Kiba had less physical endurance than I did, so if he succumbed to exhaustion now, he wouldn't be able to fight well in any subsequent rounds.

Kiba dispelled his Holy Demon Swords, readying in his hands instead for a single Holy Sword.

That sight alone was confirmation enough—he *was* planning on using it!

"I'm stronger than you," he declared boldly. *"If we keep this up, sooner or later, I will catch up to you. However, that would mean using up a great deal of my stamina. Seeing as I still need to fight in later rounds, it will be more efficient to use a blitz-style attack and finish this quickly."*

Faced with this threat, Furcas broke into a wide grin. *"You're brimming with confidence, I see. I won't dispute it. In talent, you exceed me and Altobrau. However! I shan't be defeated so easily! At the very least, I shall deprive you of a limb or two to weaken you for later!"*

Furcas was determined; that much was obvious. He fully intended to whittle away Kiba's energy as much as possible.

"I know. That's what makes you such a formidable opponent. There's nothing more frightening than a foe whose resolve is ironclad. I...may have to show you another of my new tricks." Kiba readied his blade and whispered, *"Balance Breaker."*

At that moment, an atmosphere altogether different from his Holy Demon Swords emanated from his body, that holy aura wrapping around him.

Then a number of Holy Swords shot up from the earth while Kiba began to forge several strange-looking armored beings. Those entities, their helmets decorated with what looked like dragon motifs, equipped themselves with the Holy Swords lying around them and assembled with Kiba at their center.

They encircled him perfectly, almost as though he was the commander of a knight squadron.

Furcas was left visibly shocked by this development.

"...! Wh-what?! Your Balance Breaker is supposed to be the Sword of the Betrayer! How can you have two of them?!"

Yes, Kiba's original Balance Breaker was the Sword of the Betrayer, the turbocharged version of his Sword Birth ability. However, Kiba had since acquired another ability, too.

It took Furcas a moment to realize what this meant.

"...! Don't tell me... Is that the Balance Breaker form of your Blade Blacksmith Sacred Gear?!"

Kiba nodded, replying, *"The Glory Dragon Trooper, the variant-type Balance Breaker of my Blade Blacksmith."*

Furcas had guessed correctly. During the incident with Kokabiel, Kiba had taken control of his Factor from his fallen friends and comrades. That had given him the power to wield Holy Swords—and to create them, too. As a result, he'd gained the extraordinary ability to create and wield both Demon Swords and Holy Swords, in the form of two separate Sacred Gears.

Later, during our battle in Kyoto, Jeanne d'Arc had demonstrated a variant-type Balance Breaker at work.

Afterward, Kiba had come to a realization. *"Issei,"* he'd said to me. *"With my irregular powers, maybe I can awaken another ability. What do you think?"*

And so I'd helped him activate his second Balance Breaker. He'd asked me to fight him with everything I had while he fought back with only regular Holy Swords.

Holy Swords were inherently weaker than Holy Demon Swords. Nonetheless, I had lashed out at him again and again, combining the various attack forms of my Triaina ability—which naturally left him at an overwhelming disadvantage. Finally, after a considerable amount of back-and-forth, he discovered it.

His new technique—the Blade Blacksmith's Balance Breaker! However, while employing it, he could fight only with regular Holy Swords. Similarly, he couldn't activate his Glory Dragon Troopers while wielding a Holy Demon Sword.

The standout feature of this new power was that his Dragon Knights possessed the same speed and technical finesse as Kiba himself. At present, he'd only been able to get them to reproduce his quickness, but it seemed there was still room for improvement.

Seriously, I wished I had his level of talent! To think that he'd actually been able to turn theory into reality! Thank goodness he was the prez's Knight! Damn, Kiba could be awesome sometimes!

"I had to fight the Red Dragon Emperor armed with no more than my Holy Swords to get this far... Heh... He's a frightful opponent. I could have died. His attacks truly could have killed me. But it was thanks to that training that I unlocked my second Balance Breaker."

Listen, he *told* me to do that! What kind of friend would I have been if I'd turned him down?!

No, it was precisely because he was my friend that I'd been able to lunge at him with killing intent.

Azazel was watching with apparent amusement, his chin rested on his hand. *"The Blade Blacksmith's usual Balance Breaker is the Blade Knight Mass, which*

summons a group of armored knights wielding Holy Swords. But it looks like Kiba was able to customize it, transforming it into a variant-type technique. And now he's got a squad of Dragon Knights! Ha! Looks like Issei's had a strong influence on you, Kiba! No doubt this will get the ladies fired up!"

He sounded like he was really enjoying himself.

Cut it out! You're giving me the creeps!

Was it my influence that helped Kiba develop this new power...? One of the prisoners we had taken from the Hero Faction had indeed said that those who kept close to the Red and White Dragon Emperors tended to awaken variant-type abilities in their Sacred Gears. Still, I couldn't say for sure...

While I was pondering this mystery, Kiba readied himself and his knights against Furcas.

In his current state, his attacks wouldn't be as powerful as when he used his Holy Demon Swords, yet as the leader of a full squadron, he had a great many more potential moves at his disposal. If those knights all attacked as one, then Furcas's illusions...

"Furcas! Take this!" Kiba took off at a run with his knights, multiple bodies flying toward their target at high speed!

"Ngh! I won't be defeated just yet!" Furcas cried back, urging his horse to charge in turn while he summoned apparitions around him again!

Kiba's knights and Furcas's phantoms collided!

Chiiiiing!

A metallic sound rang out!

The two fighters looked to have exchanged a single strike. Both Kiba's knights and Furcas's illusions vanished.

A heartbeat later...and Furcas started to glow with white light. A crack ran across his armor from shoulder to abdomen, smoke hissing from the damage he must have taken from the Holy Sword.

That light meant he was being retired from the battlefield! Kiba's technique had both dispelled the illusions *and* ended the contest with incredible speed!

“...Splendid,” Furcas muttered as the glow enveloped him, and he left the field.

At that moment, the arbiter declared, *“One of Sairaorg Bael’s Knights has retired!”*

The audience erupted with thunderous cheers at this announcement.

Round one was a victory for our side!



“Team Gremory has won the opening round! Now then, what awaits us in the second?!”

As the announcer riled up the crowd, Kiba returned to our home base through the magic circle. The privacy barrier grew thin, allowing us to see outside.

It was time for the prez to roll the dice again.

Once more, both Kings cast the dice atop their respective pedestals. The prez’s landed on six, while Sairaorg’s showed four!

Ten points! A large number this time around!

“What do we have here?! The sum value this time is ten! Both teams will be able to nominate entrants up to that number! They’ll be able to send out multiple contestants this time if they so choose!”

The announcer was right—with that total, we could send out a small team.

Who would the prez choose? Since Akeno and I had high values, we would have to fight alone. The prez could also nominate herself, but I doubted she would do that. Plus, Kiba had just returned from the first round, so he couldn’t be deployed.

Let Asia take care of you and catch your breath for a few minutes, Kiba.

The ward fell over our home base again, cutting us off from the outside.

Over the course of our preparation time, the prez settled on...

“We’re going to need a firm hand—Rossweisse. And someone to offer support—Koneko. I’m counting on you both.”

...Two Rooks! That was a rare combination! Rooks were worth five points

individually, so this combination would make full use of the latest dice roll.

“Very well.”

“...Understood.”

The two of them were both raring to go. Our mature magic-wielding Rossweisse was effectively a mobile cannon, while our petite Koneko was an expert with sage magic. They both stepped into the magic circle.

So, who would they be facing...?

Rossweisse and Koneko let the array transport them to the next battlefield. On the display overhead, I saw a gloomy temple’s interior. Would this round take place indoors? Huge pillars reached up from the ground, while an object resembling an altar was visible at the back of the chamber. The ceiling had collapsed, exposing the sky.

The building was similar in design to the one from our battle with Diodora. It sure brought back a lot of memories.

As for Rossweisse’s and Koneko’s opponents, one was a lightly armored blond-haired man, while the other was a giant who had to stand at least three meters tall.

“I am Lord Sairaorg’s Knight, Liban Crocell. My oversized companion here is our lord’s Rook, Gandoma Balam. We’ll be your sparring partners today.”

“...”

The silent giant—the Rook, Gandoma Balam—was massive, his forearms in particular. Even his fingers resembled blunt instruments. His face was more monster than human.

“Balam’s got to have incredible strength, right?” I asked.

“He does,” Kiba answered. “Judging by the recording of Sairaorg’s previous match alone, Gandoma Balam possesses astounding physical might.”

A Rook possessed of superhuman power. His Evil Piece only bolstered that strength.

“...Crocell, formerly one of the Seventy-Two Pillars. A descendent of a dead

noble House,” Koneko muttered.

The announcer followed this with his own description. *“Indeed! Sairaorg Bael’s servant Liban Crocell is a scion of the extinct House of Crocell!”*

I knew already that the descendants of noble Houses lost to time occasionally surfaced in unexpected places. Vali, for instance, was the descendant of a former Demon King.

In fact, the present demon authorities were actively searching for any relatives of the various families that had died out over the ages.

There were those former noble Houses that had sought refuge in the human world, and the high-class demons who now resided there considered protecting such individuals a sacred duty.

But to meet a son of a former noble House like this... Undoubtedly, he’d faced great difficulties in life. There had to be a reason why a descendent of the House of Crocell would join Sairaorg’s Familia.

“Let the second round begin!” the arbiter declared.

“...Seeing who we’re up against, I’ll go all out from the start,” Koneko remarked, shrouding herself in a combative aura as her cat ears and tails (that’s two!) revealed themselves.

This was her newest technique—*Nekomata* Level Two. By covering her whole body in her sage magic, she could temporarily unleash tremendous explosive power, boosting her physical abilities. Honestly, it made her raw strength absolutely berserk!

Koneko sprang into action, her fist flying toward the giant’s—Balam’s—face!

Thud!

The sound of the impact echoed, yet Balam appeared unbothered. He didn’t look damaged at all. If I recalled correctly, his defenses were an order greater than those of most other fighters.

Nonetheless, Koneko’s hit wasn’t some regular punch. She must have poured her sage magic into that strike, attacking not only his body but his internal *qi* energy, too. Even if a single hit didn’t seem to have much of an effect, the force

of multiple strikes would surely damage that giant from the inside.

“...Ngh!”

Balam swung his massive arm to one side. Through the video feed, I could see the air itself trembling from the force of that motion. Koneko pulled back to dodge it, and Rossweisse loosed a magical volley straight into the giant’s body!

A combined barrage of fire, lightning, ice, and wind slammed into him! And yet...he still appeared undamaged.

“...His magical resistances are high as well. I seem to be coming across a lot of foes like this lately!”

Rossweisse must have been referring to Heracles, the guy she’d fought back in Kyoto. He’d been a tough one to injure, too.

Whoooooosh!

Rossweisse’s surroundings began to shake violently. For a moment, I thought the image was breaking up. Our Valkyrie fell to her knees.

Crack!

The ground around her began to fracture, as though some tremendous force was pushing down on it!

Was someone exerting pressure on her? Then I remembered that *he* had used an ability of that kind in the recording of Sairaorg’s last match! The Knight Crocell!

“You keep letting down your guard, my lady,” Crocell said, his eyes aglow.

“...Power over gravity...” Rossweisse tried to fight back as a magic circle activated beneath her feet.

“I don’t think so! Freeze!” Crocell was controlling the magic circle with his hand, summoning shackles of ice to hold Rossweisse firm.

The ice wrapped around her legs, pinning her down!

“...Ahhh. I see. You’re a spellsword!” Rossweisse cast Crocell a fearless grin as he approached her, weapon drawn.

Her foe spun his blade through the air. *“The blood of a human sorcerer runs*

through my veins in concert with my demon heritage! I am also an able swordsman! And my Sacred Gear, Gravity Jail, grants me control over the force of attraction!"

"He can use his Sacred Gear to change the gravity anywhere within his visual range!" the prez said to Rossweisse through her earpiece. "He'll keep using it so long as he can see you! Be careful!"

His ability sounded similar to Gasper's, only instead of stopping time, it served to restrict a target's movements.

Meanwhile, Koneko readied herself to deliver a swift and accurate punch imbued with sage magic while at the same time dodging Balam's next attack.

Man! How was that giant capable of swinging those massive pillars he had for arms so easily?!

"...I know. Governor Azazel already briefed me on Crocell's Sacred Gear... It's easy enough to recognize and exploit its weakness!"

Despite still laboring under the invisible weight, Rossweisse, her hands trembling, deployed a magic circle of her own!

Flash!

A burst of light illuminated her surroundings.

"Not as easy as you'd hope, my lady! Try a mirror!"

With those words, a looking glass appeared from the magic circle in Crocell's hand as he parried the brilliant ray.

"I understand the limitations of my own ability and how to compensate for them. A mirror can be remarkably effective," Crocell said with a smirk.

Had he just read Rossweisse's move...?

No, the Valkyrie had tricked him! The magic circle beneath her feet was glowing more intensely than before!

And the flash of light Crocell had deflected with his mirror...slammed straight into Balam! For that brief instant, both Rossweisse and Balam had been enveloped in powerful radiance, and by the time it subsided, the two had

switched places! Now that hulking giant was trapped under Crocell's gravity!

"Clever! A magical technique to swap positions on the battlefield! She was just waiting for him to deflect that light attack before activating it and anticipated his next move expertly!" Kiba was full of praise for Rossweisse's tactic!

Heck, I was impressed, too!

Crocell had prepared a countermeasure in case anyone tried to blind him, yet Rossweisse had turned that assumption against him!

"Koneko! Are your punches getting through?!"

"...Yes. I've disrupted the big guy's aura. He should be weaker against magic now."

"Got it! Eat this, then, the both of you! Full Burst!" Rossweisse shouted, conjuring a multilayered magic circle before her.

That was her lethal move, her—

Booooooooooom!

A magical bombardment combining every elemental type imaginable sped into Crocell and Balam! The sheer quantity of attacks... It was beyond my ability to count! A blast of that magnitude threatened to annihilate the battlefield itself!

When finally it relented, a cloud of debris hung in the air. After the dust settled, I saw Crocell lying sprawled on the ground.

Only Crocell? What about Balam?

"Didn't I tell you...? You keep letting your guard down. Right when your enemy thinks you defeated...that's your chance to strike..." Crocell was on the verge of succumbing to his wounds, yet his eyes glowed with a mysterious light.

At that moment, both Rossweisse and Koneko were caught beneath an immense surge of gravity.

And appearing behind them, wounded and covered in blood, was Balam!

"...Nggggghhhhh!"

Whooooooooooooosh!

I could hear the sound of his fist tearing through the wind as it shot straight for Koneko's small frame, but I couldn't bear to watch.

Crocell and Balam were both swallowed by brilliant light...as was Koneko.

"Koneko...!" Rossweisse held the *nekomata's* battered frame, pulverized from the force of the giant's strike.

"...Thank goodness. If you're still standing, Rossweisse, then we can fight on..." It was clear to even the most casual of observers that Koneko had sustained grievous damage, but still she forced a smile—a truly joyous grin.

"...I'm sorry, Koneko."

"...Don't apologize, Rossweisse. I'm glad. I was able to do something useful... We beat both of them..."

With those final words, the light enveloped Koneko fully, transporting her, Crocell, and Balam away.

Koneko... You fought well... You can leave the rest of this to us...

I bit my lip and pushed aside the anger and frustration building within me. I couldn't let it go yet. It was still too soon to release these explosive emotions...!

"One of Sairaorg Bael's Knights, one of his Rooks, and one of Rias Gremory's Rooks have retired," the arbiter announced.

We won round two...but not without a sacrifice.



"We've reached the end of the second round! Team Bael is down three members, while Team Gremory has lost one. Team Gremory has the lead, but it's still too soon to guess the outcome!" the announcer said, stoking the audience's enthusiasm.

"You're unusually coolheaded. I thought you'd be angry over Koneko's defeat," Kiba remarked.

"...I'm furious. But I have to hold it in. To save it. I'm better off unleashing it later, when it can do some good."

Kiba let out a small chuckle when he heard this. “You can really be frightening sometimes. But I agree.”

That pretty boy had a pretty scary expression, too. I guess we were both highly protective of our underclassmen.

It was time for the third round. What number would we get?

Both Kings cast their dice... And the total was eight! Whoa! With that result, I could potentially be sent into battle!

Just before our five minutes of preparation time began, Sairaorg said to the arbiter, *“I will be sending in my Bishop, Corianna Andrealphus.”*

What was he thinking telling everyone whom he intended to dispatch ahead of time?!

The audience erupted into excited cheers. A photograph of the Bishop in question appeared on the display overhead.

Corianna... If I remember right...

My recollection was right the money. She had long, wavy blond hair and wore a sharp suit like that of a successful businesswoman. But above all, she possessed a wonderfully voluptuous body!

“Is this a declaration of intent?! Sairaorg Bael, what is the meaning of this?!” the announcer questioned.

Sairaorg cast his gaze in my direction.

H-hold on... Why me?

“Issei Hyoudou. If I was to tell you my Bishop has a technique that can resist your lecherous abilities, how would you respond?”

My lecherous abilities...?!

The crowd was abuzz with anticipation.

Azazel, speaking over the live commentary system, was the first to respond. *“Oh! Now that’s an interesting idea! Issei wields an enormous advantage against female opponents, what with his Dress Break and Boob-Lingual abilities...”*

“Issei Hyoudou is indeed an intriguing fighter,” added Emperor Belial. “From what I’ve heard, he seems to develop a new technique with each fight.”

Even the Rating Game’s number one had taken an interest in me! It was an honor—but at the same time, I felt suddenly abashed by all this attention!

“I always thought it pretty terrifying how his mind is filled with nothing but dirty thoughts, but all that empty space in there does give him a certain edge. He’s like a sponge, always absorbing new ideas and lessons!”

“““Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”””

Laughter came from every direction at Azazel’s remark. I was truly mortified! Sorry for being such a perv! But they were right! My mind *was* like a sponge!

“Sponge Dragon!” someone in the grandstand cried out!

Wh-what?! Nghhhhhhhhh!

“Shut up! Who said that?! Which one of you just called me a Sponge Dragon?! You can’t just stick whatever word you like in front of *dragon*! Argh!”

Despite my objections, the whole audience continued to laugh in amusement.

“Fine, then! I’ll accept your challenge!”

If it had come to this, I would just have to go along with the flow!

The prez rested a hand on her forehead, evidently troubled. “...Good grief. You realize this is obviously a trap, right? You have an overwhelming advantage in terms of strength, so the other side is clearly planning something.”

“They’ve got my attention,” I responded. “A woman who can resist my techniques? And Sairaorg himself just issued a challenge... He’s practically asking me if I can overcome whatever moves she has. That guy wouldn’t do anything too underhanded, right?”

I trusted Sairaorg’s honesty. Instinct told me his challenge was simply that and had been issued in earnest. I’d only spoken to Sairaorg for a few brief moments, but I felt that he wouldn’t try to lure me into a trap... Maybe it was because we were so similar that I felt confident about it?

Plus, I really was curious! To think that there could be a technique capable of

overcoming my Dress Break and Boob-Lingual! How could a woman alone possibly defend against my lecherous abilities? I wanted to know. I had to. After all, I was only allowed to use my Boob-Lingual in this match thanks to Sairaorg's intervention!

The prez breathed a heavy sigh. "Go, then. I'm curious how she intends to resist your powers, too. But remember, don't let down your guard."

I had permission!

"Right! I'll be back soon!" I said with a respectful bow before heading for the magic circle.

"It looks like the Breast Dragon is off to battle!" the announcer declared.

""Breast Dragon! Breast Dragon! Breast Dragon!"" the children in the audience cheered emphatically. I'd never seen anything so inspiring.

"Would you look at that?! The smiles on those children's faces, cheering on the hero of the underworld! This entrance has set their hearts on fire!"

The announcer wasn't exaggerating. It was incredible. The face of every last child whom I could see on the display was ecstatic. They were calling out my name at the top of their lungs.

Because the privacy ward hadn't been deployed, my every move was being followed on the live broadcast. The words BREAST DRAGON were written beneath my face on the monitor! "The Song of the Breast Dragon" was even being played in the background! Had the organizers prepared a special entrance performance just for me?!

This level of anticipation, of excitement—it was enough to go to your head, to warp your mood and spirit.

Still, no matter what happened, I couldn't afford to lose.

With that thought, I stepped into the transport array.

When the light of the magic circle subsided, I found that I was standing in the middle of what looked like an expansive garden overflowing with buds of every color imaginable. There were so many different scents.

Such a beautiful site was to be my battlefield...

I glanced ahead at my opponent, the female Bishop. If memory served me right, she excelled with all kinds of demonic powers. However, she was supposed to be a Support-type fighter. What was she playing at?

I stood on guard, and the arbiter appeared. It looked like he'd also been transported to the battlefield.

"Let the third round begin!"

It was time to start! First things first, I activated my gauntlet and Promoted to a Queen! Strictly speaking, now that I had unlocked my Triaina ability, I could use a Promotion even without having to seek prior authorization from the prez.

With the countdown for my Balance Breaker ticking down, I surged forward! My opponent did the same, unleashing a volley of magical attacks, casting layer upon layer of what looked like ice-based throwing spears—nothing I couldn't dodge!

"You're good, kid!" the Bishop said softly.

Whoa. As plainspoken as she was, I could hear the sensuality in her voice.

I dodged the frozen projectiles and likewise evaded the other magical attacks that came after them. I was weakest during those moments before I could activate my Balance Breaker, but that didn't mean I hadn't developed certain countermeasures. Thanks to my daily training, I could keep up this cat-and-mouse chase for a while if I had to!

As I bolted across the flower garden, dodging attack after attack, my countdown reached zero!

All right! Now comes the main act!

"Balance Breaker!"

A red flash of light erupted from my gauntlet, wrapping around my body. It took only a brief moment for my aura to solidify around me into a suit of armor, and my transformation was complete!

"And there we have it! The Breast Dragon has arrived! Just listen to the children's cries of excitement here in the stadium!" the announcer declared as the display in the sky overhead cut to show the kids in the audience.

“““Breast Dragon! You can do it!”””

Could there be any greater encouragement? I was raring to go!

Let's see if this Bishop lady really can resist my techniques!

I reached into my mind and let the image that I was visualizing expand as I my Boob-Lingual technique.

That mysterious space unfolded around me. First, I would read the intentions of her breasts! Then I would use my Dress Break on her! I would feast my eyes on her naked body and then promptly defeat her! Yep! That was the only way!

“Here we go! Expand, my—”

Just as I unleashed the demonic energy I had built up in my mind to activate my Boob-Lingual ability...

Click.

...the Bishop lady began to unbutton her clothes in front of me.

M-my eyes were practically glued to the sight of her undressing!

S-s-s-s-seriously?! Whaaaaat?! She's stripping naked?! Here?! Now?!

She paid my gawking no heed as she removed her suit jacket. At first, I wondered whether she was simply getting rid of her fancy clothes to get serious about this fight.

But that was wrong.

After taking off her jacket, she moved immediately on to her skirt! What was going on here?! Voluntarily disrobing during such an important event?! How could this even be possible?!

In the face of this miraculous development...my attack faltered.

“Whoa! Incredible! Without any warning, Corianna Andrealphus has begun to undress! I'm sure you can feel the gazes of our male viewers watching in suspense! Governor Azazel, what do you make of this?!”

“...”

He was staring lecherously, too! And I could understand why!

Yep, this was a joyous occasion! But it was still a battle! I couldn't contain my rising excitement, yet that didn't stop me from activating my technique!

“Boob-Lingual!”

The mysterious dimension expanded around me, catching the Bishop lady within range! *All right! I activated it without a hitch! Hear me now, O breasts!*

“Hey! Chest of the lady over there!” I called out. “What’s your next move?”

The breasts of the Bishop lady responded in a voice only I could hear. *“Next... I’m going to undo the buttons of my blouse. One. By. One.”*

...

At this declaration, I focused my attention on her movements.

Her fingers hovered over her blouse, and she slowly popped the buttons free.

...Wonderful.

No! What *was* this?! I’d asked her what she was planning next, and her breasts had simply announced her intention to strip naked! I wanted to hear about her attacks!

“Issei, what are you doing?! Her breasts spoke to you, didn’t they? Ready your next attack!” the prez instructed through my earpiece.

B-but, Prez! I...I...!

“I can’t! Her chest only told me what she’s going to remove next!”

“—! What?! That was all they told you?!”

The prez was just as taken aback by this as I was!

“In that case, just use your Dragon Shot to finish this now!” she instructed me.

A whimper leaked out from my throat. “I can’t, Prez! I mean... I can’t! I can’t attack a beautiful woman who’s stripping naked! And I can’t use my Dress Break technique, either, seeing as she’s already taking everything off by herself!”

That was the honest truth! Watching the Bishop remove her clothing piece by piece was nothing short of divine...! Tearing it all off in one go would be absolute madness! She was discarding every article by choice! No more

wondrous situation existed!

This feeling... Only my fellow men could possibly understand it!

Over the live commentary, Azazel began to explain. *“So this is what Sairaorg’s Familia had planned! What a terrifying technique! Corianna Andrealphus’s breasts tell him what she’s planning to remove next, while she strips before his very eyes. For a guy, there’s no sight more enthralling than a woman slowly taking off her clothes. That’s why striptease shows were created—because men, at an instinctive level, find them absolutely addictive. It’s inconceivable for Issei to use his Dress Break technique now! This is the perfect gambit, tailor-made for the mind of a pervert! What genius on the part of the Bael Familia!”*

I know—I know, Teach! I recognized what she was doing so clearly that the understanding of it physically hurt!

Heck, she was staring my way with eyes half-lidded and letting out a seductive sigh! Only another lecher could possibly comprehend my feelings!

So this...this was Sairaorg’s battle plan! Magnificent! It was enough to bring tears to my eyes!

Thank you!

Gratitude aside, my greatest weakness had been exploited. This was indeed a means of overcoming my Dress Break and Boob-Lingual abilities. A genuine blind spot. My pair of deviant techniques could only be foiled by one who understood the inner workings of a pervert’s mind!

I found myself trembling in fear. The Rating Game was a profound sport.

“...You’re the worst.”

For a second, I thought I heard Koneko reprimanding me. Was I imagining things? No, perhaps she really did mutter those words from the medical facility she was sent to after being eliminated!

I could see the Bishop lady’s beautiful legs! Her full bust encased in a bra! Her pinched-in waist! Her sexy underwear! Wonderful! Perfect! Words failed me.

Finally, she was down to only her underwear.

“Just so our viewers are aware, as there are children watching this striptease,

we'll have to start blurring parts out soon."

Right! That would be necessary to protect the kids.

Now then, what would the Bishop lady take off next? Well, she was down to only two pieces, so undoubtedly it would be her brassiere, revealing her...her... her gorgeous b-b-breasts!

As I stared fixedly her way, she reached for...her panties!

—?!

At that moment...

...the fire raging within me suddenly cooled.

...No.

...No, she couldn't!

A deep indignation took root within me, consuming me with rage.

After all that, she was going for her panties?! Her panties *before* her bra?!

Nooooooooooooo! I cried inside.

"Bra first, *then* the panties!"

"Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!"

Before I knew what I was doing, I'd unleashed a super-powered Dragon Shot straight for the Bishop lady.

"What?! Impossible! Kyaaaaargh!"

My attack must have caught her completely unaware, as she was swallowed whole by that oncoming blast.

"One of Sairaorg Bael's Bishops has retired," the arbiter announced dispassionately.

I might have won, yet I found myself staring up at the heavens vacantly.

What a hollow victory.

I needed everyone to understand that I was a bra-first kind of guy.

And so thanks to a minor quirk of erotic propensity, I snatched victory in the

third round.



“That was a grueling fight,” Kiba said upon my return to our home base.

The bastard was flashing me a wry grin.

Shut up! Let me wallow in despair! How could those two unparalleled techniques, practically invincible against women, have such a devastating weakness?! And panties before the bra?! Unheard-of!

Well, it was time to put that aside and focus on the next dice roll.

The combined total appeared on the overhead display—eight! Eight again! If not for the rule against entering two consecutive rounds, I could’ve been called to fight.

“Eight. I suppose I’ll be going, then,” Xenovia said, taking a step toward the magic circle.

As a Knight, she had a value of three, so naturally she was fully capable of participating.

“Yes, that would make sense. It’s about time we let you take the stage,” the prez agreed.

Still, that left another five points.

The prez glanced across at Kiba and Rossweisse. “I wonder which of you would be best to accompany her?”

Kiba was also a Knight, so also worth three points, while Rossweisse was valued at five points as a Rook. Either way, the combination with Xenovia would be within the total of eight, and both combinations had their strengths.

Surprisingly...another figure timidly raised his hand—Gasper.

“...I—I’ll go. U-um, it’s around the midgame now...and anything could happen... Yuuto and Rossweisse are both stronger than I am, so maybe we should save them for later...?”

Everyone was stunned at Gasper’s volunteering. Who could have expected him of all people to share his views without anyone asking him first?

He had a point, though. It *was* better to keep Kiba and Rossweisse in reserve for the latter half of the match. Although it occurred to me that you could devise a good strategy around sending out particularly powerful individuals in the midgame...

Gasper's eyes radiated determination.

The prez showed him a smile. "In that case, Gasper, can you back up Xenovia? We'll need you to support her with your mystic eyes and your vampire abilities."

"I—I'm a man, and I have to avenge Koneko!" he declared softly.

His whole body was trembling, but his strength of will was plain to all.

That's the spirit!

"I'm counting on you, Gasper."

"O-okay, Xenovia!"

Thus the Xenovia-Gasper tag team was born.

For the fourth round, the battlefield was a rugged, rocky wasteland.

With so many stones, it looked difficult to secure your footing. It was a good thing that Xenovia was a Power-type Knight. Had Kiba gone instead, the terrain would have hindered his top speed.

Xenovia and Gasper's two opponents appeared.

The first was a man with a lanky physique, and the second was a petite girl—no, a petite *boy*—wielding a staff of some uncanny design.

From what I recalled, the tall man was a Rook, and the boy a Bishop.

"Team Gremory has sent in the Knight Xenovia, wielding the legendary Holy Sword the Durendal, and the girlish boy with a loyal fanbase, the Bishop Gasper!"

""""Hooraaaaaaayyyy! Gaspyyyyy!""""

Just as the announcer finished speaking, a powerful wave of cheers erupted from a group of male fans in the audience.

Hmm, so my underclassman is popular among a certain type of viewer, huh? You're not one to be underestimated, Gaspy.

For her part, it looked like Xenovia had more female fans than male ones. Perhaps female Knights tended to garner the support of their fellow women?

"As for Team Bael... Well now, this is a surprise! Both contestants are descended from extinct noble Houses! We have the Rook Ladora Buné and the Bishop Misteeta Sabnock! They hail from families that formerly ranked among the Seventy-Two Pillars! Governor Azazel, it seems that quite a few members of Sairaorg Bael's Familia are from extinct Houses, don't you think...?" the announcer said.

"So long as they've got ability, he'll take anyone in, regardless of status. That's how Sairaorg Bael does things. No doubt the remaining members of those dead noble families responded to his call. The descendants of extinct Houses are given protection by the current demon government, but out there in the real world, they surely face a whole lot of prejudice from those in power. What with how many folks prize purity of blood above all else, there's probably lots who would like to pretend those struggling families that survived by mixing their blood with others didn't even exist," Azazel explained drily.

The announcer, it seemed, was at a loss to respond.

"Ha-ha-ha. That's certainly true." Emperor Belial laughed.

At that moment, the tall, lanky man—the Rook—spoke up. *"Exactly. Our master, Sairaorg, welcomed those of us who exist today thanks to our mixed blood, of human and demon heritage, with open arms."*

"Sairaorg's dream is our dream," the boy added resolutely.

The eyes of both fighters burned with a sense of purpose.

"Let the fourth round begin!" the arbiter declared, signaling the start of the next bout.

Both sides immediately launched into their attacks.

"Gaspar, morph into your bat form! Strike once he's ready, Xenovia!" the prez instructed from here in our home base.

Gaspar became a cloud of bats, which proceeded to rapidly spread out across the battlefield, while Xenovia lashed out with Durendal, sending multiple energy waves careening toward the enemy Rook and Bishop right from the get-go!

Those keen waves of energy flew straight ahead, carving through the rocks and boulders that stood in their way!

Both enemies dodged the oncoming pulses, with the Bishop—Sabnock—releasing a plume of fire with his demonic powers!

Oh yeah! His specialty is casting spells!

“No you don’t!”

The eyes of the bats swarming above the field glowed red, freezing those demonic flames in midair! Next, Xenovia followed through with another slash from Durendal, the energy nullifying the fire completely! What expert coordination! All that practice working as a team had paid off after all!

“Ladora! Instructions from Sairaorg! We’re to take down the swordswoman first! Give me a moment to prepare!”

“Roger that!”

The two fighters must have been receiving guidance from their master, as the Bishop fell back, expanding his aura to shroud his whole body! Trust me, it was an ominous sight...! Something about that power washing over him struck me as sinister...

At the same time, the Rook stepped in front of the Bishop as though to shield him and began to tear off his clothes.

I remembered reading before the match that Ladora the Rook was supposed to have exceptional defense.

Da-dum! Da-dum!

Suddenly, Ladora’s lanky body swelled, expanding into a malformed shape. Was he buffing his guard? No, this was something else! His once svelte body continued to bulge, eventually sprouting a tail and a pair of wings! His mouth stretched to reveal a row of fangs, while his fingers elongated into piercing

claws!

And he just kept on growing larger by the second!

“Gwaaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhh!”

Before I knew it, a hulking monster reared its head in front of Xenovia—a dragon!

That scrawny Rook had morphed into a massive dragon!

“...The Buné clan may be demons, but they’re known for commanding dragons... A select few of them can actually adopt the form of the fearsome creatures... And he’s one of them...!” The prez wore a bitter expression, as though she’d just swallowed a worm.

A demon capable of becoming a dragon?! That sounded like something from a fantasy story! A mere look was enough to tell how powerful that Ladora guy was, And this was my first time seeing him! The other team hadn’t used *this* ability during their match against Zephyrdor!

Xenovia and Gasper were matched against the rarest of the rare, an opponent with abilities uncommon even among his own family!

“A dragon transformation?! There was no info on that! You sly fox, Sairaorg...! Did you make him awaken that ability through endless training?!”

Even Azazel was taken aback!

So Ladora had developed that power through intense practice?!

I could only speculate as the battle between Knight and dragon commenced!

Xenovia lashed out with her Holy Sword, loosing both careening energy waves and direct attacks, yet the dragon’s defenses proved sturdy against every blow.

Her Durendal Cannon might have been able to deal considerable damage with a single blast, but it was slow to charge.

“Gasper! I’m gonna take that thing down! Buy me some time!”

So she was planning on using it!

Xenovia fell back just as Gasper swarmed around the dragon as a flock of bats.

“Eek! Eek!”

The little things clung to the dragon all over, holding it back to let Xenovia retreat.

“Prez! Will Gasper be able to power up if he drinks that dragon’s blood?” I asked.

He was carrying a small vial of my blood just in case, but seeing as he was already attacking Ladora, it might, I reasoned, be worth a shot.

The prez shook her head, however. “We don’t know what Buné’s blood will do to him. It could end up being better than expected, or worse. The safest option would be to have him stick to yours, Issei.”

Right. That made sense. If that other dragon’s blood didn’t agree with Gasper, it would spell his defeat.

The dragon was clearly having a hard time dealing with all those bats fluttering around him, and he breathed a pillar of flame. Fortunately, Gasper evaded deftly.

Xenovia raised Ex-Durendal to the heavens and began to charge her power.

“That’s it! Holy Sword! Seal thy power!” the enemy Bishop cried out. His staff glowed with an eerie light, a radiance that promptly enveloped Xenovia whole.

Surrounded by that unearthly luminance, an ominous pattern flowed over her body. Xenovia’s hands trembled until she finally lowered Ex-Durendal.

“...What’s going on...? Durendal isn’t responding...!”

Wh-what?! I watched, agape at whatever phenomenon had just ensnared Xenovia’s body. It’s not responding? What’s that supposed to mean?! Xenovia was a natural Holy Sword wielder! Had that innate quality of hers... disappeared?

“I, too, possess human blood...and a Sacred Gear—Trick Vanish. It’s a cursed ability, one that I only recently managed to bring under control,” the Bishop explained, his expression strained and haggard.

A Sacred Gear?! And one he’d only recently mastered?! That explained why he hadn’t used it in his Familia’s previous Rating Game! Was this another fruit

of his team's training efforts?

"The Trick Vanish is a Sacred Gear that can completely shut down a target's abilities for a certain length of time at the cost of pushing the user's mental and physical endurance to their limits," Azazel explained. "Evidently, the Bael Bishop has sacrificed his own powers to temporarily restrain Xenovia's ability to wield a Holy Sword."

So I was right! He *had* robbed Xenovia of her skills! The drain on the boy's strength had clearly been steep, though, as he looked suddenly exhausted!

"...Gah!"

Durendal seemed to be growing increasingly heavy, because Xenovia was unable to hold it at all...

"...I was actually trying to cause your weapon to inflict damage back on you when I sealed it, that Holy Sword of yours... You're a truly capable swordswoman...," the Bishop muttered, swaying on his feet.

In other words, while Xenovia could no longer use Durendal, she *had* managed to prevent it from releasing holy power upon her when she fell into the Bishop's trap.

"Gwaaaaarrrrrgggghhhhh!"

With a roar, the dragon plunged from the air! There was no way Xenovia could dodge. Right when it seemed too late, a cloud of bats wrapped themselves around her!

Booooooooooom!

The dragon slammed its heavy limbs into the ground—but the area that it viciously trampled was already empty.

Xenovia, still surrounded by a swarm of bats, had teleported behind the rocks! Gasper had rescued her! Nice one!

"...Sorry, Gasper. It's looks like I'm out of tricks," Xenovia admitted remorsefully.

"N-no you're not! You're much more useful to the president than I am, Xenovia!" Gasper said, trying to encourage her. He reached into a small bag and

retrieved a vial and a piece of chalk from among his tools. *“I—I know a few ways to dispel curses!”*

Gaspar activated a magic circle in the palm of his hand and pressed it up against Xenovia’s body. It looked like he was trying to analyze the hex that had been placed on her.

“You can’t escape! Where are you?!” the dragon bellowed as he scoured the rocky landscape for my friends.

It was only a matter of time before they were discovered!

“Gaspar, do you think you can lift the curse?” the prez asked.

“...Yes. I should be able to dispel it with the items I have on me,” Gaspar responded. Using the piece of chalk, he drew a fresh magic circle with Xenovia at the center.

Once the unfamiliar pattern was complete, he retrieved the vial filled with my blood.

I’d given that to him so that he could boost his own power levels.

“I think I can lift the curse if I mix Issei’s blood into the magic circle. But it might take a little time for the effect to sink in...,” Gaspar explained.

He’s going to use my blood for that...?

Xenovia must have realized the problem, too, as she began to protest: *“Hold on, Gaspar. If you use Issei’s blood, you won’t be able to—”*

“Xenovia. I know what my role is,” he interrupted her with a broad smile.

“Gaspar...?” Xenovia raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

Having finished drawing his magic circle, he leaped out from behind the rocks. *“I—I’ll buy you some time! Once the curse is removed, finish charging Durendal!”*

Was he planning on rushing his opponents *without* drinking my blood?!

“Don’t be reckless, Gaspar! Hide!” the prez shouted into her earpiece.

Gaspar didn’t obey, taking off at a run and looking determined. *“No! I—I have to stall! If you’re going to win, President, you’ll need Xenovia!”*

“Listen to me!” the prez commanded. “Keep out of harm’s way!”

However, the dragon and the Bishop had already seen Gasper.

“I’ve found you now, vampire. Hidden the swordswoman, have you? She must be close, I’m guessing. Maybe she’ll come out if I shower the area in flames?”

Gasper trembled before the giant beast, yet he did not run. Instead, he held out an arm, calling up demonic power to cast a spell.

“I—I won’t let you!”

Was he planning to charge at that dragon to protect Xenovia?!

“Going it alone, huh? I commend your courage. You’re shaking, and yet you stand resolutely before a dragon.”

The dragon praised Gasper’s bravery...before breathing a huge plume of fire!

Whooooooooooooosh!

Gasper tried to defend himself with his magic circle!

Get out of there! Don’t be crazy!

Our little shut-in was resolved to use himself as a shield for Xenovia!

“Kyaaaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhh!”

He let out a shrill scream, and his magic circle shattered, blown away by the barrage of flames.

Gasper had sustained severe burns, yet he still rose to his feet.

“...I’m...not finished!”

“Gasper! Don’t be insane!” Xenovia cried.

At the sound of her voice, the dragon reared his head and began to scan his surroundings. *“Was that the swordswoman? You’re close, aren’t you? Show yourself!”*

“Arghhhhh!” Gasper unfurled his demon wings and grabbed ahold of the dragon’s arm.

“—! Get off me! I can defeat you anytime, but that Durendal girl needs to be dealt with now! That curse won’t last forever!”

The dragon caught Gasper in his free claw and gave him a vicious squeeze! An ear-rending, sickening *squelch* echoed across the battlefield!

“Aaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhh!”

The prez averted her gaze from the sight of Gasper shrieking in agony.

“...Stop it!” Asia wailed, covering her face with her hands.

The dragon hurled Gasper’s crushed frame to the ground.

He was so badly wounded that he was having trouble breathing. Somehow, he managed to crawl toward the dragon.

“...It hurts... The pain... But I... I’m still...a man...in the Gremory Familia... Xenovia... Hold on... Just a little longer...”

Xenovia didn’t respond. She must have heard his ear-rending scream and accepted her underclassman’s iron determination. To respect his sacrifice, she hid as best she could, although her eyes overflowed with tears.

“Get out of my way!”

The dragon dealt Gasper a powerful kick, but the little vampire only clawed his way back.

“...Lesson one...of being a man...in the Gremory Familia...! Men need to protect women...!”

Shuddering in pain, Gasper lifted himself from the ground...repeating the words I had taught him in the clubroom.

“...L-lesson two... A man...needs to always find his feet...!”

He began to activate a fresh magic circle in his hands, when...

Thud!

...the Bishop, wavering on unsteady legs himself, beat Gasper with a horizontal swipe of his staff.

“Give up already. You can’t beat us.”

The Bishop’s voice was ruthless. Even his shaky attack must have dealt critical damage to Gasper in his present state.

Nonetheless, Gasper held firm to a nearby rock and forced himself upright once more.

“Lesson...three...!” His face was swollen, his feverish voice barely audible as he edged forward. *“Whatever happens...don’t...give up...! I have...to protect... Xenovia...!”*

Stomp!

It was a merciless attack. The dragon trampled Gasper underfoot.

My little underclassman was battered and broken. He clearly wouldn’t be able to fight any longer. It wouldn’t be long before he was retired.

—!

A tremor coursed through my body as I watched.

Gasper was on the verge of death, yet still he moved, ever so slightly. He was trying to approach the enemy.

“...I’m...part of...Gremory... The president...has to...win...”

A tear streaked down my cheek as I watched the scene play out.

“Gaspeeeeerrrrr!”

Xenovia, having undoubtedly felt the force of the dragon’s attack from her position, cried in rage, her scream cutting across the battlefield!

“Xenovia... Was I able to help everyone?”

You fool...! You stupid, stupid fool!

You followed my advice...! You stuck to it so stubbornly...! No one could possibly call you useless!

You...you...

You’re an outstanding man of the Gremory Familia...!

“...” The prez averted her gaze from the events on the screen.

“...Prez, please,” I urged her, unable to hold back sobs. *“Don’t look away. Gasper is doing his very best. He’s willing to die for you... He’s a shut-in, afraid of his own shadow... And now he’s fighting harder than anyone... So please*

don't look away!"

She looked ready to break down into tears, too, but she held them in and glanced back up at the display.

"You're right. I'm sorry, Issei, Gasper...", she said stoutheartedly.

Asia and Akeno were sobbing, Rossweisse's eyes were damp, and Kiba was biting his lip so hard that blood was trickling down his chin.

"You can still move? You're obsessed with winning, huh? Color me amazed. It would be too cruel to wound you any further. How's this, then? I'll ease your suffering." The dragon prepared to breathe another pillar of flame, when...

"I don't think so."

...Xenovia emerged from her hiding place, her body emanating an incredible aura. It was the same holy aura that flowed through Durendal, so powerful that it sent a chill down my spine.

The marks left by the curse that the Bishop had placed over her were gone. Gasper's gambit had paid off!

Xenovia approached her underclassman, who had already lost consciousness.

"You did it, Gasper. You're a man... I'm sorry you had to go through all this for me...", she apologized, tears streaming down her face.

"The curse was broken?!" the Bishop exclaimed, pointing his staff at Xenovia.

The dragon spread his wings.

Xenovia rose back to her feet and muttered, *"...It wasn't strong enough."*

With a smooth cutting sound, she retrieved the Ex-Durendal from its sheath and adjusted the weapon into its attack form.

"Just like how my determination wasn't strong enough. I shouldn't have let myself get caught like that. Unlike Gasper, I wasn't ready to put everything on the line for my friends, for the president—for my master. Gasper here was stronger than I ever was! I'm ashamed...! I'll never forgive myself...!"

Xenovia's words pierced my heart. I *felt* ready to do whatever was required of me—we all did. Yet maybe my resolve wasn't all it could be.

I had Gasper to thank for teaching me this lesson.

“What should I do, then? What can I do to live up to his ideal?” Xenovia spoke softly as she wiped tears away, her voice like a malediction. *“Yeah. Maybe there’s only one way. I’m sorry, Gasper. At least let me crush these two for you. That’s my answer to your determination!”*

Stzssssssssss!

A pillar of holy light, Ex-Durendal’s incredible aura, shot up into the sky. I doubted that even a high-class demon would be able to withstand a hit from that.

“No you don’t! I’ll use my own life force to seal your abilities this time!” With those words, the Bishop raised his staff as he prepared to activate his Sacred Gear. Suddenly, he froze, body and mind both.

The dragon turned his gaze to Gasper. His body was bathed in the white light that signaled imminent retirement, but he was still awake, his eyes shining with crimson light!

He’d stopped the Bishop in time!

Gasper...! Tears flowed down my face at the sight of my underclassman, who fought on to the very end!

“It can’t be!” the dragon roared. *“Those time-freezing evil eyes?!”*

Xenovia brought Durendal down with a mighty swing. *“This is Gasper’s victory!”*

Booooooooooom!

The massive surge of holy energy consumed the Bishop and Rook.

“One of Sairaorg Bael’s Rooks, one of his Bishops, and one of Rias Gremory’s Bishops have retired.” With the arbiter’s decree, the fourth round concluded.

Now we’d lost both of our youngest members. We upperclassmen were supposed to protect *them*, yet they’d fought harder than anyone else.

Koneko. Gasper. I promise you both this! We’ll win this match! We will! I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure the prez wins! So for now...rest.

You've done well, Koneko and Gasper.

I'll pay the other team back in kind...

King

What was I thinking? *Let's win this?*

I—Rias Gremory—felt utterly ashamed of my own naivete.

Those two were the most determined to do whatever necessary.

They'd entered the battle ready to lay down their lives.

For their friends. For me.

And for victory.

I—I was a pathetic King. A weak, stupid, utterly abysmal master.

I needed to be resolute, too.

Even if it meant getting down into the dirt, crawling on all fours, I *would* come out of this victorious.

Life.4

As a Servant of Rias Gremory

With the end of the fourth round, there were seven of us remaining—the prez, Akeno, Kiba, Xenovia, Asia, Rossweisse, and me.

The other team was down to Sairaorg, his Queen, and his masked Pawn.

In terms of numbers, we had an overwhelming advantage.

The announcer was busy hyping up the audience. *“We may well be reaching the end of the midgame here! Sairaorg Bael’s team is down to only three members, while Rias Gremory’s still has seven! Team Gremory has the lead, but Team Bael’s remaining fighters are all powerhouses! Will they be able to stage a comeback?!”*

I turned to Kiba with a question. “The other team’s Pawn needed seven pieces to be recruited, right?”

Kiba nodded. “Yes, it’s rather unsettling to think about. At the very least, he has to be stronger than the fighters we’ve faced up till now.”

I’d assumed as much... There was no telling when he would make his entrance, but we would have to be on alert.

The two Kings rolled their respective dice to decide who would enter the fifth round.

Given that Sairaorg’s side was down to so few members, both he and the prez had to roll a few times before they reached a number that worked for both.

After a few attempts, the workable result was a nine.

Anyone from our side could enter with that total, although it was perfect for a Queen.

“The other side is down to three combatants. They’ll be able to nominate

either their Queen or their Pawn with a nine... Something tells me the Pawn won't make his debut just yet, though," the prez said.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"I don't think Sairaorg wants to send him in if he can help it," the prez explained. "There's been no indication whatsoever that he might choose him. At first, I thought Sairaorg might be saving his Pawn for later, but he's been holding him back for too long. There have been a few opportunities for him to play the Pawn, yet he hasn't. I expected Sairaorg to send him in against Koneko and Rossweisse."

The combined total of the dice for the second round had been ten, which meant Sairaorg could have paired his Pawn with either a Knight or a Bishop.

That must have been why the prez had anticipated the Pawn at the time. And Sairaorg had seemingly known we would send in Rossweisse, given her mastery of powerful magic.

H-hmm...

Nope, I couldn't make heads or tails of it! There was no doubt about it—I'd need a good strategist when it came to building my own Familia!

"So do you think he's going to pick his Queen this time, President?"

"I do, Yuuto. Undoubtedly, we'll be up against Sairaorg's Queen, Kuisha Abaddon—of the Abaddon clan."

The House of Abaddon was one of the Extra Demon clans that existed outside of the Seventy-Two Pillars.

The third-ranked player in Rating Games was a member of that same family. From what I'd overheard, that clan was an especially powerful one.

The Abaddon family kept itself at a distance from the present demon government, secluded in a for-off corner of the underworld.

"I should go," Akeno suggested.

—!

"...Are you sure, Akeno? Sairaorg's Queen hails from the Abaddon clan.

Judging by the recording of their last match, she's a formidable enemy."

The prez wasn't kidding. During the battle against Zephyrdor Glasya-Labolas, Kuisha had overwhelmed her opponents with her immense demonic power and the Abaddon clan's characteristic Hole technique.

That Hole move would prove to be a major nuisance. Rumor said that it tore a breach in the fabric of reality and was capable of absorbing practically anything, casting it off into another dimension.

"Maybe I should go?" I suggested. "I might have a chance of winning."

Akeno shook her head. "That's assuming you use your Triaina move, no? It isn't time to play that card, Issei. Wait until both sides roll the highest possible value. Save it for the endgame. Until then, I'll reduce the other team's numbers. I can afford to act a little reckless with Kiba, Xenovia, Rossweisse, the president, and you still standing," she replied, flashing me a grin.

If she was willing to go that far, I couldn't ask her to back down...

"All right, Akeno. I'm counting on you," the prez stated.

"Yes, Rias. Let's win—all of us."

Akeno stepped into the magic circle and disappeared.

She arrived in a field dotted with countless towering stone edifices.

Akeno stood atop one of those towers, while a young woman with a blond ponytail stood at the summit of the one across from her.

As we'd expected, it was Sairaorg's Queen, Kuisha Abaddon.

The battle would be between our raven-haired, ponytailed Queen Akeno and Sairaorg's blond-haired, ponytailed Queen Abaddon!

"I thought it would be you, Vestal of Holy Lightning," Abaddon greeted.

"Yes. Do excuse my inexperience," Akeno responded with a fearless smile. *"It's such a pleasure to be here."*

The arbiter took his place on the field, glancing at both contestants. *"Let the fifth round begin!"*

The battle of the Queens commenced!

Beating their wings, Akeno and her opponent took off into the sky, launching into a fierce shooting match using their demon powers!

Akeno loosed a wall of fire attacks, while her foe responded with a huge mass of ice!

When Akeno attacked with a water ability, Abaddon met it with a surge of wind. The two seemed evenly matched during this airborne duel! Perhaps Akeno's skills had grown from her training, because she was able to loose far more powerful attacks than she ever had before.

They were so incredible, in fact, that the aftershocks of both fighters' techniques caused the towers surrounding them to crumble!

Still, Akeno couldn't afford to let down her guard. Her opponent still hadn't used that Hole ability yet.

Akeno summoned a dark cloud overhead, from which bolts of Holy Lightning streaked down toward her foe!

Bzzzzz-baaaaannnnngggg!

There was a bright flash as electricity raced toward Abaddon. Yet before it could find purchase, the air around Sairaorg's Queen warped, and a gaping aperture appeared above her. That was it! Her Hole ability!

Akeno's supercharged electric burst was rapidly consumed by that spatial tear!

"Is that it?! How's this, then?!" Akeno, perhaps having been waiting for this opportunity, responded by calling more bolts of Holy Lightning from the sky!

Bzzzzz-baaaaannnnngggg!

An incredible number of supercharged lightning bolts struck the surrounding area, the towers around the two Queens collapsing one after the next from the force of those impacts!

A wild dance of electricity streaked across the landscape and crashed upon Abaddon.



Not even a high-class demon could survive a direct hit from that barrage! And there was nowhere for Abaddon to run! This was it! All of us, myself included, were confident in Akeno's victory!

To our surprise, however, Abaddon enlarged the Hole that she was projecting overhead, creating more of those spatial anomalies all around her!

The giant Hole and the smaller ones effortlessly absorbed Akeno's volley of Holy Lightning, leaving her speechless.

A cold smile crossed Abaddon's face. *"My Holes can expand in size, and I can create a great many of them if I so please. Not only that, once I absorb your abilities, I can subject them to analysis and then turn them back on you—like this."*

More Holes than I could count suddenly appeared around Akeno, all facing her directly!

"I've already removed the electric attributes from your Holy Lightning—so now, I'll return the holy qualities to their owner."

Stzzzzz!

Beams of deadly light coursed for Akeno. For a demon, holy light was lethal, and it was enveloping our Queen whole...

Before I knew it, the arbiter's dispassionate announcement was echoing in my ears.

"Rias Gremory's Queen has retired."



"So not only can it absorb abilities, it can transform them into counters, too?" Kiba's voice was strained.

Akeno's loss had left us all in a state of utter shock. Her incredibly potent demonic powers had been evenly matched by her opponent. Had she managed to score a hit with her Holy Lightning, she would have won. She'd been on the verge of victory!

Our mistake had been underestimating Abaddon's Hole ability.

Dammit... I knew I should've gone instead of Akeno. I could have finished the

enemy Queen off at once, but instead, here I was, consumed with bitter regret.

“...We have to get back on track. We can’t afford to let ourselves get distracted this close to the end. The real fight starts here.” The prez spoke softly, as though the word were meant for herself.

It was time to roll for the sixth round. Both Kings cast their dice.

And the combined result...was twelve!

The maximum possible outcome!

“There we have it! Our Kings have finally rolled a twelve! At last, with this number, Sairaorg Bael himself will be able to enter the match!”

“““Whhhhhooooooooaaaaa!”””

The audience went wild at the announcer’s remark.

Sairaorg began to remove his jacket, as though in response to this development.

Beneath, he was already armored for battle, garbed in what looked like a tight black combat suit. His magnificent physique stood out even from a distance.

This was it! Sairaorg himself was about to enter battle! He cast his gaze our way.

His eyes radiated such determination that they sent a chill down my spine. The sense of overwhelming pressure he was emanating was incredible. The weight threatened to make every hair on my body fall out! And that heavy resolve was directed at us.

“Issei.” Kiba rested a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll fight him with Xenovia and Rossweisse.”

—.

Two Knights valued at three points each and one Rook at five—a total of eleven.

“...I see,” I answered.

Kiba’s mind was made up. No matter what I said, it wouldn’t do much to change his decision.

“We’ll try to wear him down as much as possible for you and the president.” Kiba flashed me his golden pretty boy smile. There was no dissuading him.

“Right. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yuuto! Don’t tell me you’re...”

Kiba must have guessed what the prez was about to say, for he nodded. “I can’t win against Sairaorg Bael by myself. I’m well aware of that. So what’s my purpose here? The answer is simple. My role is to reduce the enemy’s strength as much as possible. Even if it means I end up getting eliminated from the match... Xenovia, Rossweisse, will you join me?”

The others both nodded in affirmation.

“Of course. I never would have guessed I could work up this much courage from simply knowing that Issei and the president are at my back,” Xenovia remarked. “I think I know how Akeno must have felt.”

“I’m glad our roles here are so clearly defined. I’ll do everything I can to wear our opponent down for as long as possible,” Rossweisse added.

The three of them all wore looks of raw determination. My nails were dug so hard into my palms that they were drawing blood, yet I forced myself to smile. I couldn’t let their strength of will go to waste. I had to see them off on a positive note.

We were here today to secure a win alongside Rias Gremory. For the sake of that victory, for our friends, we had to take whatever moves were necessary to checkmate the opposing team.

“If Issei were to team up with Yuuto or Xenovia...,” the prez began.

Kiba shook his head. “We can’t let Issei go out yet. Asia, after this match, Issei will probably be put against the other team’s Queen. If that happens...”

He fell silent there, letting the prez take over. “If that happens, because of the rule against fighting two matches in a row, Issei won’t be able to compete in the one after that. So you’ll have to enter in his place. You should retire right away, without fighting. Assuming that Sairaorg doesn’t want to send out his Pawn, Issei will be able to take over for the next round and will end up battling

Sairaorg directly. Should that round prove to be the final bout, we won't need to use your healing abilities... That's what you're thinking, isn't it, Yuuto?"

Kiba nodded, evidently glad to have the prez's understanding. "Yes. You've thought it through well, President."

Both the prez and Kiba had anticipated all that?

"That's why this is a crucial moment. We'll shave away Sairaorg Bael's strength to the best of our ability," Kiba declared with a refreshing grin.

"And if we can, we'll defeat him, too!" Xenovia added, filled with energy.

Kiba flashed us a bitter smile. "Yes. That will be our goal, in any event."

The prez heaved a deep sigh, apparently convinced. "Please inflict as much damage on him as you can... I'm sorry. I thought I was ready for this, but as you've proven to me again, I still have so much left to learn... I'm such a naive, useless King..." she said in self-derision.

"It was meeting you that saved us, President. All of us. We've only come this far because of your love and affection. We'll win this match for you. We all will," Kiba assured her. He, Xenovia, and Rossweisse each approached the magic circle, ready to step foot onto the battlefield once more.

As he passed me, Kiba said with a smile, "I'll leave the rest to you."

"You got it, buddy."

Our two Knights and remaining Rook were transported to the next battlefield.

They arrived at the edge of a lake. Sairaorg was already waiting for them, his arms crossed.

"Is this Rias's plan?" he asked, glancing their way.

Sairaorg spoke as though he'd anticipated this very situation.

Kiba, Xenovia, and Rossweisse didn't respond, but Sairaorg's lips curled into a smile anyway, seemingly impressed. *"I see. It looks like Rias has matured a little."* He unfolded his arms. *"You can't defeat me. You understand that, right?"*

"We aren't just going to just roll over. We'll soften you up before sending you off to the Red Dragon Emperor!" Kiba vowed.

Sairaorg was visibly pleased. *“Fine words indeed! Let’s see how long you can keep up...!”*

“Let the sixth round begin!”

That was the arbiter’s signal.

Immediately, a strange mark, an uncanny pattern of sorts, appeared all over Sairaorg’s limbs.

“This restraint normally binds my body, sealing much of my power. I’ll be removing it to fight you with all my might!”

With a soft flash of light pouring from his limbs, that pattern faded away.

The next instant, a powerful gust of wind exploded around Sairaorg, its force such that it carved a crater below his feet!

The water in the lake shook violently, ripples coursing across its surface!

Sairaorg’s body was shining from the center of the crater.

Wrapped around him...was something very similar to the fighting spirit Koneko employed. No, it *was* fighting spirit! Had Sairaorg learned how to use sage arts?!

Just as I hit upon that notion, Azazel’s voice came over the commentary feed. *“...Damn. He’s wrapped himself in fighting spirit. And it’s dense enough that you can see it with the naked eye...”*

“Are you saying he’s mastered fighting techniques that require manipulation of qi energy?” the announcer questioned.

“No. I’ve never seen anything to suggest he knows sage magic.”

Emperor Belial offered his own thoughts. *“Indeed. He hasn’t learned sage magic. That aura of his, his fighting spirit, is the result of his mastery over traditional martial arts, awoken after pulling through so much physical training. Having pursued pure strength, his body discovered something different from demonic power—the energy at the root of life itself—which he drapes around his body. You could say that what we’re seeing is his excess vitality and life force made manifest.”*

So Sairaorg's arduous training had unlocked something different from demon magic? He wielded pure, unadulterated power that was billowing around his flesh...?!

Kiba, Xenovia, and Rossweisse, faced with that oppressive energy, each wore a stern expression.

"I won't let down my guard, not once!" Sairaorg roared. "You warriors entered this field prepared to face defeat. You are no average opponents. And so I'll go all out, too, even if it means putting my own safety on the line! Because I respect you as worthy foes!"

Whoosh!

The earth beneath him was sent flying, and Sairaorg vanished! Was it an opening dash?

"No you don't!"

Rossweisse deployed spell circles all around her, preparing to launch a magical Full Burst in every direction.

"Rossweisse, over there!"

Kiba, deftly following Sairaorg's rapid movements, pointed with the tip of his Holy Demon Sword!

Rossweisse unleashed her barrage in the direction indicated right as Sairaorg appeared in the line of fire!

That huge mass of energy formed from every possible magical element was set free across the field! Rossweisse let loose with so many attacks that her figure was lost behind them all! And Xenovia's holy wave attacks from her Holy Sword mixed into the onslaught, too!

"Hmm!"

Bang!

Sairaorg's fist swept through the air with a burst of wind, effortlessly pushing back those attacks!

You've got to be kidding me! His fists alone are powerful enough to deflect a

magical barrage of that magnitude?! I was dumbstruck.

Sairaorg continued to press on through the assault, moving in for Rossweisse in the blink of an eye!

“Run—”

But before Kiba could finish telling her to flee, Sairaorg’s fist crashed into Rossweisse’s abdomen, the strike so powerful that the air itself shuddered from the force of the impact.

The hit shattered her Valkyrie armor, cruelly scattering it to the wind!

Her face awash with anguish, Rossweisse was hurled far across the lake. By the time she plunged deep into the water, her body was already aglow with the white light that signaled imminent elimination.

She was knocked out from a single blow?!

“One down.”

“Aaaaauuuuuggggghhhhh!”

As Rossweisse faded away, Xenovia lashed out with a diagonal cut.

Whoosh!

Again, Sairaorg vanished, reappearing directly behind her. A kick lanced at Xenovia, who twisted to evade.

Boom!

Yet while she dodged the physical portion of that attack, his strike cleaved through the air with enough force to carve the lake itself in half...! Just how powerful was that kick?!

“He’s too fast!” Xenovia cried in shock.

“After besting your overconfident magic user...next comes the two swordfighters. Both of you wielding Holy Swords at that.”

I watched as Kiba’s and Xenovia’s auras surged with all the strength at their disposal in the face of Sairaorg’s dauntless grin!

“Kiba! This guy’s insane! We’ll have to put every ounce we’ve got into this if

we're gonna win!"

"I'm aware, Xenovia! Don't think about the outcome! If we hold back at all, hoping to plan our next moves, we'll be finished...! He's that strong!"

Seeing just how unnerved his foes were, Sairaorg grinned, evidently fulfilled.
"Very good. Try to stop my fists!"

Whoosh!

Sairaorg lunged forward, his fist, encased in his fighting spirit, barreling toward Kiba!

Kiba summoned up a wall of Holy Demon Swords in front of him, and yet...

Crash!

...Sairaorg smashed through them effortlessly in a single strike!

"—! My Holy Demon Swords!"

"Too soft. That won't be enough to halt my attacks."

Kiba, knowing how dangerous it was to fight his opponent at close range, fell back, only for Sairaorg to chase after him! The two moved with such swiftness that I could hardly follow them across the battlefield! They were both too fast!

Cr-crack!

"...Ugh..."

A dull metallic sound rang out! It was Kiba, taking a direct hit along with his Holy Demon Sword! The blade had been effortlessly destroyed!

"You've been working on developing your strengths, but it seems you forgot to polish your techniques. Still, your sense of loyalty for your master and your comrades is formidable... You're a fine Knight. Rias, I envy you for having this Knight... Your defense is your only weak point, Yuuto Kiba. Don't let this defeat weigh too heavily on you. Not even you can withstand these fists."

"Durendal!"

Xenovia rushed to Kiba's rescue, hurling multiple energy waves with her Holy Sword as she closed in on Sairaorg!

“Holy Sword energy waves? Interesting! Let’s see which is superior: my supreme fortitude or your legendary Holy Sword!”

Sairaorg’s fighting spirit surged in anticipation as he prepared to catch Durendal’s attacks head-on!

The two made contact...and Sairaorg emerged unscathed! His energy didn’t look weakened in the slightest!

“— . A direct attack couldn’t inflict any damage? You’re a monster.” Xenovia was aghast, her whole body shaking.

Sairaorg stretched his neck to one side. *“That was a good blow, but it isn’t enough to stop me.”*

“Xenovia! Let’s work in tandem!” Kiba called.

Xenovia stood at her fellow Knight’s cry, leveling her blade at Sairaorg in combination with her partner!

The enemy King dodged the high-speed attacks from both Kiba’s Holy Demon Sword and Xenovia’s Ex-Durendal with the barest of movement.

Kiba fell back, quickly dispelling his Holy Demon Sword and switching to a regular Holy Sword. Then he summoned up his company of dragon knights!

“Nooooow!”

With that order, the dragon knights charged Sairaorg as fast as they could!

“So this is your new Balance Breaker? I’ve been waiting for this moment!”

Sairaorg met the approaching dragon knights head-on, expertly dodging their quick strikes as he plowed through their heavy suits of armor one after another!

He was crushing them underfoot as though they were made of paper!

“They have numbers and speed! But what they lack...”

Tear...

With the fleeting sound of shattering metal, the final dragon knight collapsed in a heap.

“...is hardness.”

Sairaorg had destroyed the entire squadron of dragon knights with nothing but punches and kicks.

Faced with the display of Sairaorg's incredible martial arts, Kiba was rightly shaking in fear.

They were in trouble! Kiba and Xenovia had both put so much effort into their training after our trip to Kyoto, pushing themselves to ever greater lengths after their humiliating defeat at the hands of Siegfried.

Yet despite all that, they couldn't land a single blow on this new opponent!

"You're brilliant, both of you. Your abilities are awash with possibility... But at present, I'm the more capable fighter."

Smash! Thud!

Having evaded both his opponents' attacks, Sairaorg slammed the heel of his palm into Xenovia's stomach while at the same time lashing out at Kiba's flank with a roundhouse kick.

Cr-crack...

A gut-wrenching sound came from both bodies.

""Gah!""

Both Kiba and Xenovia spat out blood as they were sent tumbling across the ground.

My friends... The dear companions I'd overcome so many trials with...

They had been felled by Sairaorg's blows—those fists capable of striking deep into their target's core.

They were an embodiment of raw power.

Shrouded in fighting spirit, his raging aura, the figure standing before Kiba and Xenovia struck me as that of a fierce god.

Kiba laughed weakly, blood staining his lips. *"...Issei fought on after taking a blow like this... Yep, he's incredible..."* With those words, he rose back to his feet. *"...I can still move... Thank goodness for that. I can still fight. I can still soften up this opponent...!"* He held his Holy Demon Sword valiantly in his

hands.

Xenovia likewise forced herself to her feet, unsteady though she was. *“...It isn’t time yet to catch my breath...”*

“Let’s weaken him, Xenovia. Let’s keep on fighting, even if just for a little longer. For Issei. For the president.”

Sairaorg, still shrouded in his fighting spirit, beamed as our two Knights braced themselves *“You still want to entertain me...?”*

“Oh, we’ll give you a good time, all right...!” Xenovia declared.

Suddenly, Rossweisse emerged from behind her! She was wielding a sword in her hands, a weapon with a transparent blade!

“You let down your guard! How about a magical Full Burst at close range?!”

The resurrected(?) Rossweisse closed in on Sairaorg, activating a myriad of spell circles and unleashing an all-encompassing assault!

Boooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

A tremendous explosion rang out, leaving smoke streaming from Sairaorg’s body! It looked like we’d finally been able to deal some damage!

The prez broke into a grin. “The Rossweisse that Sairaorg defeated earlier was actually one of the Excaliburs used to make Ex-Durendal’s scabbard! She transformed Excalibur Mimic into a Rossweisse clone! And this... This is the real Rossweisse, who was using Excalibur Transparent to conceal her presence! It seems like each of the Excaliburs used to forge Ex-Durendal has had its capabilities upgraded! So long as Xenovia, their wielder, grants someone her approval, they can wield them individually without issue for a short time, even if they don’t usually have the ability to use Holy Swords! They can copy someone’s appearance or make them invisible, but it isn’t quite the same as wielding a Holy Sword itself, and it can only be done so many times in one day.”

Was this strategy the prez’s idea or Kiba’s?! Either way, it was incredible! This explained why the arbiter hadn’t announced Rossweisse’s elimination!

“You noticed when Xenovia unleashed those holy energy waves while Rossweisse fired her Full Burst, right? Xenovia must have thrown Excalibur

Mimic and Excalibur Transparent then, passing them to Rossweisse, who then created a duplicate to continue fighting on her behalf while she turned invisible to await an opening,” the prez explained.

“Then why was the fake Rossweisse glowing when it fell into the lake?” I asked.

“She must have cast a spell on it to trick Sairaorg. That magic also mitigates the holy damage inflicted by Holy Swords. It was the only reason Rossweisse was able to wield those Excaliburs, and even then, she only managed it for a brief period.”

“Awesome! I never knew they could fight together like this!”

“I’ve been wondering whether there was a way to use the additional capabilities of Xenovia’s Holy Swords. I did instruct them on a few methods, but they mastered this tactic on their own.”

Whoa! Those three were astounding, pulling off a combination like that on the spur of the moment!

Sairaorg, having taken the brunt of that Full Burst, straightened up, his body coated in blood.

“I did wonder why there was no announcement. I assumed you’d sunken to the bottom of the lake, clinging on in the face of imminent elimination... Excellent, all of you.” Sairaorg had only praise for our side’s joint maneuver.

The glint in his eyes had sharpened. He clenched his right fist, slowly pulling it back. The fighting spirit engulfing his body concentrated there, and his hand swelled in size!

“Allow me to pay you my respects...with this.”

“—!”

Perhaps having sensed something, Kiba, Xenovia, and Rossweisse retreated across the battlefield at once.

As he pulled away, Kiba cried out, *“Xenovia! This is the moment of truth! It’s time to use it!”*

Yet no sooner had he done so than Sairaorg threw his arm forward.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

The video feed shook violently! Looking carefully, I saw that the very earth in front of Sairaorg had been blasted away by the force of that attack, as though a massive earthquake had struck!

“One of Rias Gremory’s Rooks has retired.”

“—!” The prez and I were both left shocked by this announcement! Rossweisse had been taken out?! She’d been eliminated for real!

Smoke rising from his hand, Sairaorg clenched his fist once more, slowly pulling back.

“Even the faintest scratch from this punch can prove fatal. No half-hearted blow can stop me!”

Sairaorg lashed out once again, his hand coated in fighting spirit!

Kiba and Xenovia launched simultaneous sword strikes, aiming straight for their foe’s right arm!

Kiba brought down his Holy Demon Sword on Sairaorg’s outstretched limb, but instead of cutting through it, the blade was smashed by Sairaorg’s fierce power!

Xenovia’s attack with Durendal was similarly rebuked by Sairaorg’s spirit, unable to press into his flesh.

Xenovia gritted her teeth, and Kiba grabbed on to Durendal’s pommel! They were wielding the Holy Sword as one! Durendal unleashed a huge flash of energy, slicing clean through Sairaorg’s arm! The limb, still shrouded in fighting spirit, dropped to the ground, where it remained without disappearing. Did that mean Sairaorg’s life force was stronger than even that holy aura?!

Man, was I shocked that Kiba grabbed hold of Durendal! Come to think of it, he *could* wield the Holy Sword so long as he had Xenovia’s approval! What an incredible attack! The two Knights had combined their strength!

My joy was short-lived, however.

“Excellent. You’ve managed to take my right arm. I’ll have to use the Phoenix Tears now. After all, I want to enter the final round in full form.”

With that said, Sairaorg kicked Xenovia into the air, launched into a series of strikes, and slammed her hard into the ground!

I watched as the light faded from her eyes. That assault had knocked her unconscious!

Having witnessed the sequence firsthand, Kiba tried to move away, but Sairaorg's left fist caught him in the face.

It slammed Kiba hard against the ground, and Sairaorg dashed forward while still gripping the Knight's body. After grinding his opponent against the earth, Sairaorg flung Kiba into the air and drove his left fist deep into his stomach!

Thud!

That punch reverberated audibly across the battlefield, its momentum passing through Kiba's body and blasting away much of the lake's water.

Utterly broken, Kiba collapsed. His lips curled in a faint smile. *"...We've done... our job... Now...it's up to my master...and my friend...to defeat you..."*

Kiba and Xenovia faded away into two bright flashes.

"Splendid. No other words are necessary. Thank you for that wonderful battle," Sairaorg said as he collected his severed limb.

From what I could tell, he was completely sincere.

"Issei. President. Please win. You have to beat him..."

"Two of Rias Gremory's Knights have retired."

Pawn

While watching Sairaorg use his Phoenix Tears on his severed arm, I—Rias Gremory—felt more relieved than anything else.

Yuuto, Xenovia, and Rossweisse had dealt him considerable damage in the course of their desperate bid to take him down. So severe, in fact, that Sairaorg had been forced to use his only dose of Phoenix Tears to recover.

They'd fought brilliantly.

Had this match been held even a short while sooner, I would likely have been cursing myself bitterly right now. The pain of seeing my dear servants wounded so would've been too much to endure.

Things were different now, though. Joy was the strongest emotion inside me. I was glad we'd been able to back Sairaorg into a corner.

Was I becoming accustomed to cruelty? Had my love for my Familia faded?

Perhaps the real answer was neither of those two options. Watching my dear servants fight so desperately for me and their comrades, something inside me underwent a dramatic transformation.

Maybe I'd become stronger. Perhaps we *all* had. Not just in body but in mind as well.

Now it was time to move on to the next round. Undoubtedly, Sairaorg would send in his Queen next. And I would need Issei...

As I cast my gaze toward him, I was rendered speechless by what I saw.

He was radiating an unmistakable ferocity—a razor-honed, murderous hostility directed straight at the other team's home base.

Asia shuddered, as I did, at the sight of this metamorphosis.

“We’re coming up on the endgame! Both Kings, please roll your dice!”

As requested by the announcer, I stood in front of the podium. The simple act of throwing the small die felt heavy.

What would the outcome be this time? The more I tried to think about it, the deeper my thoughts wound themselves into a rut. The pips of the die stared back at me, unflinching... For a King playing Dice Figures, these small items were weightier than they appeared.

I rolled the die across the surface of the pedestal. The result was a five. What did Sairaorg get?

The screen above told me that he’d rolled a four.

Nine in total. And after just one roll at that. I would send out Issei, while Sairaorg would surely choose his Queen.

Issei stepped forward, his footfalls soft on the ground. He wore an eerie kind of smile as he glanced over his shoulder.

“Prez, Asia, I’m off.”

With those words, he stepped into the magic circle.

For a split second before he vanished, I caught a shift in his expression.

His features were twisted in rage.

Issei was transported to the center of a massive coliseum, encircled by rows of empty seats.

Standing across from him was the other team’s Queen, Kuisha Abaddon.

Faced with Issei’s unusual silence, she raised an eyebrow in suspicion. *“You seem unusually relaxed, Issei Hyoudou. I thought you would be pleased to face a woman...”*

“I am! I’m ecstatic! I’m always happy to greet a fresh beauty!”

After a short pause, an awkward grin carved its way into his face.

“Rias. Issei is...” Asia trailed off.

“Yes, I know,” I answered. *“He’s barely holding everything in...”*

We both knew him too well, which was why we were so certain.

His fury was one spark away from exploding.

Issei's feelings for his friends ran deeper than anyone else's, and he'd been keeping everything bottled up. Normally, he would break down in grief or rage while watching his comrades suffer brutal defeats, but today, he'd displayed remarkably little emotion.

The arbiter appeared between the two combatants, the match about to begin.

Issei spread his arms wide and muttered, *"This will do, won't it? I don't have to hold it in anymore, do I? Kiba, Akeno, Koneko, Xenovia, Gasper, Rossweisse... I'm at my limit here."*

Abaddon narrowed her eyes in obvious doubt as she watched Issei mumble, seemingly to himself...

"Let the seventh round begin!"

The contest was underway! Abaddon remained still, waiting for Issei to make the first move.

"Activate your Balance Breaker, Red Dragon Emperor. My master, Sairaorg, wishes to see you fight in your true form, and so as his Queen, that is my desire as well."

Kuisha was a strong woman with a firm sense of determination. I imagined she had powerful feelings for Sairaorg...

Issei's countdown ended, and his armor formed around him. *"...I can't hold back."* He squeezed the words out of his throat. *"If you don't want to die, you had better put everything you have into defending yourself. That's the only way you'll retire from this match safely."*

"That's quite a claim. Very well. I'll put my full power into stopping you. For my master, Red Dragon Emperor, I—"



“I’ve warned you,” Issei interrupted, his body already radiating crimson light.
“Welsh Sonic Boost Kniiiiigggggghhhht!”

“Change: Star Sonic!”

Pieces of Issei’s armor came away, and he sped forward at breakneck speed.

Whoosh!

With incredible velocity, Issei appeared in front of his opponent before she had time to react. Even I hadn’t followed his movements until the last moment!

His figure burning with crimson power, Issei cried, *“Welsh Dragonic Roooooooooook!”*

“Change: Solid Impact!”

With that, his armor suddenly thickened.

“Aaaaauuuuugggggghhhhh!”

With a deafening roar, Issei released the firing hammers at his elbows, charging forward with a merciless punch as his energy poured out in plumes. The strike raced toward Abaddon, and...

Flash.

...before Issei had even followed through, a white light enveloped his foe, and she faded from sight.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

The aftershock of Issei’s attack tore through the coliseum, destroying the half of the structure ahead of him without leaving so much as a trace.

“Sairaorg Bael’s Queen has retired,” the arbiter announced.

Issei had won. The round had ended in an instant. He’d closed the gap between himself his opponent using his Triaina technique and brought the contest to the swiftest conclusion possible.

Abaddon hadn’t been given a chance to use her Hole ability.

That said, Issei’s punch hadn’t actually made contact. Instead, I believe the opposing Queen was forcefully retired the instant before being struck.

There could be no doubt about it. Sairaorg had called her back.

Sairaorg's face appeared on the overhead display, his expression deeply troubled. *"...I retired Kuisha myself. If I hadn't, the Red Dragon Emperor would have slaughtered her. You were trying to kill her then, weren't you?"* he asked Issei.

Issei retracted his visor to show his face. *"I'm sorry. I can't contain my rage. Forgive me. I was thinking of my fallen friends."*

His cold, cruel tone of voice sent a shiver down my spine.

As I'd suspected, he'd been holding in his seething emotions; his fury over seeing his friends get struck down had pushed him to the breaking point.

When Sairaorg realized that, he broke into an ecstatic smile. *"Your eyes...! What murderous rage...! I've dreamed of this moment, of fighting you fist to fist, Red Dragon Emperor. Let me ask a question of the organizing committee. Hasn't this gone on long enough? It would be folly to hold this man back all because of some arbitrary rule! For our next round, I would like nothing more than to bring my team's entire fighting force up against everything that our opponents have to offer!"*

—! A team battle? Does he want to fight me, Issei, and Asia together alongside his Pawn?

Something told me my guess was right. Rather than taking a break before the final showdown, he wanted to seize on the present tension and launch straight into the deciding fight.

Sairaorg wanted to fight the Red Dragon Emperor at his strongest, and he'd definitely recognized this was his best opportunity to realize that goal.

The crowd roared in excitement at the suggestion, while the announcer exclaimed, *"Wow! Sairaorg Bael has come out with an incredible proposal!"*

Emperor Belial appeared on the screen, a grin on his face. *"It isn't difficult to imagine how the remainder of the game will play out. Due to the rule against consecutive battles, the next round will surely be between Bael's Pawn and Gremory's Bishop. Following that...we'd have the final showdown between Sairaorg and the Red Dragon Emperor. It would be a very predictable way to*

continue. One might even say boring."

Azazel stroked his chin before sharing his own thoughts. *"In that case, a team battle would cinch it. There's nothing to complicate a team fight, and no doubt it would keep the excitement high. The only question is what the organizing committee will decide. The predictable route, or a group showdown?"*

"It's fine by me, if that's what everyone wants," I offered for anyone listening.

I intended Asia to forfeit the next round anyway. We might as well skip the detour and move straight to the finale.

After a few long minutes, the announcer received the committee's decision. *"Ah, here we are! I've just received a report from the organizers! They've approved the request! The next round will be a final team battle to settle the Rating Game! An all-out slugfest between each team's remaining members!"*

The audience roared in excitement.

With that settled, Sairaorg cast Issei an indomitable grin. *"There we go. I'm afraid I might end up going overboard. I won't ask you to forgive me if I kill you; just know that you might not come out of this alive."*

Issei responded with a smile of his own. *"I'll be fighting to kill as well. I wouldn't stand a chance otherwise, and I wouldn't be able to show my face to my fallen friends afterward, either."*

"I'm already dying of anticipation..."

There was no stopping the duel between these two men now.

We'd reached the final round.

Life.MAX vs Power.MAX

The Red Dragon Emperor vs the Nemean Lion

Already clad in my Red Dragon Emperor armor, I stepped foot on a sprawling plain alongside the prez.

I'd snapped a moment ago. My pent-up emotions got the better of me, and I met Sairaorg's challenge with murderous defiance. However, in the minutes since, I'd managed to cool down somewhat.

I could hardly believe I'd lost it like that. It had been a long time since anything got me so furious and ready to kill. Well, watching one's friends get struck down one after another was unbearable...

The announcer leaned into the microphone. *"At long last, the battle for the top spot, this contest between Bael and Gremory, has reached the climax! Thanks to a suggestion on the part of Sairaorg, the final round will be a team bout! The Bael side is down to its King, Sairaorg, and his mysterious Pawn, Regulus! The Gremory side consists of Switch Princess and King, Rias, and everyone's favorite hero, the Breast Dragon, the Red Dragon Emperor himself, the Pawn, Issei Hyoudou!"*

What an awful introduction! The prez's face had turned bright red!

""""Squishy, squishy squish!""""

""""Breasts!""""

The children watching in the audience cheered in imitation of their hero.

Thanks, guys!

We'd left Asia back at the home base for the same reason she had been asked to forfeit earlier. Once the battle got underway, our opponents would target her first. So it was too risky to send her into harm's way.

I doubted the other side would be able to take her hostage, but I couldn't

stand the idea of watching her get cruelly beaten down.

That may not have been a particularly delicate way of putting it, but the truth was that she wouldn't be able to contribute a whole lot to this contest. Having a healer on our side might offer us some semblance of relief, but we were up against Sairaorg and a Pawn who had needed a whole seven pieces to be recruited.

I would rush to Asia's defense if either foe targeted her, but she would undoubtedly take some hits. Should that happen, our odds of victory would slip further away.

Sorry, Asia, but the situation is what it is. Please just stick to the sidelines this time around.

Anyway, once a King was defeated here, either the prez or Sairaorg, the Rating Game would be over.

"Now then, shall we commence the final round?" The arbiter stood between both teams on the battlefield. "...Let it begin!"

At long last, we'd reached the final fight. The opposing Pawn and I immediately Promoted to Queens, increasing our strength.

The prez and I braced ourselves, readying fighting stances, when Sairaorg let out a small chuckle. "Rias. There's something I ought to tell you before we begin. Your Familia is wonderful. Frankly, I'm jealous of their loyalty to you. They were worthy foes, each of them."

Sairaorg must have been truly grateful to say that about his enemies. Now all we had to do was defeat him and claim victory.

"I stand before you with my Pawn. As do you. Our teams have more or less the same composition." Sairaorg faced me. "Issei Hyoudou. The moment has come at last."

He and I hadn't fought since our duel in the basement of the Gremory castle. I'd been no match for him back then...but I was stronger now!

I pointed at Sairaorg. "I don't bear you any grudges! I'm not jealous, either! This is a Rating Game! But I *will* avenge the others! I'm not mature enough to

forgive someone who would do *that* to my friends...!”

Sairaorg looked to be trembling, his heart evidently aflame from my words. “You sound like you’re at your limit...! I expected nothing less. You’re the kind of man who can’t bear to see his comrades suffer an ignoble defeat. You’ve done well to endure this long. Let it out; unleash it. Let’s end this contest with a decisive showdown!”

Booooooooooom!

I ignited the thrusters on my back, firing them at maximum strength as I shot toward the opposing King.

Sairaorg shrouded himself in his fighting spirit and kicked off the ground, running to meet me!

Our fists crossed paths right as we each struck the other on the cheek!

Wham!

Despite wearing armor, my skull rang with intense pain! Heck, my helmet had been literally destroyed!

However, I was just getting started!

Let’s do this, Ddraig!

“You got it!”

“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”

I sent my boosted power straight to my fist, increasing my momentum as it impacted flat into Sairaorg’s face!

Thuuuuuud!

I landed the blow so perfectly that a dry cracking sound echoed all across the battlefield!

“Bah!” Blood spewed from Sairaorg’s nose, also trickling from the corners of his lips.

Not only that, he staggered for a moment, unsteady on his feet.

“My friends might not have been able to land a hit on you themselves, but

that one was for them.”

Sairaorg wiped the corners of his mouth. “Such a formidable blow...! You’ve poured your spirit into your body. How have you managed to go so far after only being reborn as a demon so recently? That level of power is beyond the reach of any superficial fighter! I thought you were making light of me by refusing to use the new ability you displayed against Kuisha, but no! Even in your regular Balance Breaker state, your strength is formidable indeed!”

Well, yeah. It was easiest to fight in my standard Balance Breaker form, so I’d dedicated myself to perfecting the basic parts of my combat style.

“Continuing with regular physical training even after developing new specialized abilities... I bow my head to you,” Ddraig praised, his tone filled with amazement.

Thanks to all that effort, I’d discovered that by putting everything I had into a counter, I could deal damage through Sairaorg’s intense fighting spirit.

Ddraig, I’ll need you to increase my defenses whenever he lands an attack, I thought to the dragon within me.

“All right, but if you keep taking blows like that, you’ll exhaust yourself before too long.”

Maybe, but it beats taking the full brunt of those punches. This is it, the last phase. Let’s give him everything we’ve got.

After a brief exchange with Ddraig, my fight with Sairaorg began in earnest, each of us lashing out with punches and kicks at close range.

I couldn’t deny it—his martial arts were better than mine. There was clearly a limit to how much you could learn from real-life battles alone, although I had picked up some additional tricks with Azazel’s guidance. Still, there was just too much of a gulf between our respective ability levels!

Thankfully, my accumulated battle experience was enough to hold my ground and withstand Sairaorg’s attacks!

I left defense to Ddraig, who was busy channeling his own power into my armor to stave off our foe’s heavy spirit-infused blows!

“You’ve honed your attacks in actual combat, I see! That explains how you can hit me so surely, giving me your undivided attention!”

Sairaorg was laughing! / was completely serious here—desperately so!

After several close exchanges, I fell back. That’s when I spotted Sairaorg’s Pawn out of the corner of my eye.

He was facing the prez, and he quietly removed his mask. Honestly, he looked about the same age as me.

But that lasted only a split second.

With a disconcerting noise, his flesh began to warp, swelling and expanding until he became something completely different.

Golden fur coated his entire body while his arms and legs had grown thick and burly.

His lips receded to reveal a row of razor-sharp fangs, a tail sprouted out behind him, and a mane of golden fur grew thick around his neck.

“Roooooooooaaaaarrrrr!”

He’d become a gigantic lion, a mammoth figure at least five or six meters in length. An object, some kind of jewel, was embedded into his forehead.

The lion shook his magnificent mane and positioned himself before the prez.

“Whoa! Team Bael’s mysterious Pawn has shown his true form—a gigantic cat!”

The announcer was taken aback by this development. Who wouldn’t have been? I *definitely* was! Sairaorg’s Pawn just shape-shifted into a huge beast!

“Don’t tell me... Is that the Nemean Lion?! No, that jewel...” Azazel seemed to have realized something important.

“Wh-what do you mean?” the announcer asked him.

“...In Greek mythology, the Nemean Lion did battle with the warrior Heracles, who was tasked with slaying it as one of his twelve trials... The biblical God later sealed it inside a Sacred Gear, one of the thirteen god-destroying Longinuses, the Regulus Nemea. Supposedly, mastering it can grant enough power that you

could cleave the earth in two with a single swing! And it's capable of transforming into a huge lion! It can also protect its wielder from projectiles. My sources noted that its wielder went missing a few years ago... Has Sairaorg recruited him as his Pawn...?!"

Seriously?! That huge lion was a Longinus?!

Sairaorg, however, shook his head. "Unfortunately, his rightful vessel is dead. When I found the person who had been bequeathed the Regulus Nemea, they'd already been murdered at the hands of a band of mysterious assailants. Only the Sacred Gear, in the form of a battle-ax, was safe. It should have disappeared once its vessel breathed their last, but that battle-ax had a will of its own. It transformed into a lion and annihilated those who slayed its master."

So with its owner dead, that Sacred Gear started acting on its own...?! I'd never heard of such a thing before!

"So I recruited him into my Familia. I considered it a fateful encounter. My mother's family is renowned for presiding over lions."

Sairaorg's mother had been born to the House of Vapula, famed for their many lions. It did indeed sound like a twist of fate.

"...A Sacred Gear operating independently, without an owner...? And a Longinus, at that?! Reincarnated into a demon?! I don't know which is more incredible—the lion himself or the Evil Pieces that recruited him...! Interesting! Interesting! No wonder we couldn't locate it! Ah, why are so many Longinuses popping up in this era?! Sairaorg! Do you hear me?! Bring that lion to my lab sometime! I need to study him!"

Man, Azazel looked ecstatic. He was beaming like a kid on his birthday. A Sacred Gear reincarnated into a demon sounded like an exceptionally rare phenomenon.

"I'm surprised, too. I had no idea this was even possible. Whenever my previous Sacred Gear vessels died, I lost consciousness immediately. Every time I came to, I had already been transferred to whoever ended up inheriting the Sacred Gear next..."

Huh. So there was something fundamentally different about this lion that

distinguished him from Ddraig...

“His power is highly unstable, likely because he’s a Sacred Gear without a vessel,” Sairaorg explained. “Until today, I wasn’t willing to risk sending him into battle. It wouldn’t do for him to go berserk and start attacking friend and foe indiscriminately. But now, with me here in the arena with him, I will be able to stop him should something go awry.”

Was that why Sairaorg had held back from using his Pawn for so long? A fighter who was difficult to control without his master certainly sounded ill-suited to Dice Figures.

“Whatever the case, it looks like my opponent is your Longinus,” the prez said, readying herself.

Prez, I’ll leave that one to you! I’ll handle Sairaorg!

We both turned to our respective foes, the prez letting loose with her power of destruction, me lashing out with my fists.

Unfortunately, there’d be no end to this contest at this rate! I would have to use my Triaina ability if I was to defeat Sairaorg! If I didn’t, he would wear me down until I didn’t stand a chance! If I was going to win, it would take a rapid, decisive blitz!

Each time Sairaorg fell, he rose back to his feet. I couldn’t find so much as a second to catch my breath, engaging him over and over again. Blood gathered in my mouth, but so long as I could still taste it, that was okay!

I wanted to activate the Ascalon...but with my underdeveloped sword skills, it’d be tough to deal with a formidable enemy shrouded in fighting spirit. No, hand-to-hand combat was the more effective choice.

In the midst of our back-and-forth, I watched as Sairaorg underwent a change.

His punches with his right fist were coming slightly slower than those with his left. They seemed to have diminished ever so slightly in strength, too.

Wait... Is he still feeling the effects of when Kiba and Xenovia severed his arm with Durendal...? Didn’t he use Phoenix Tears to recover from that wound?

“We’ll soften you up before sending you off to the Red Dragon Emperor!”

Kiba's words as he dealt that blow echoed in my memory.

Wow. Tears welled up behind my visor as I realized what my friends had done for me.

Thanks for the pass, guys...!

I waited for Sairaorg to strike again with his right fist... I could already read the strength and speed of that strike!

He may have lacked any notable weaknesses before, but things were different now!

"This is for my friends!"

Just as Sairaorg's blow came flying toward me, as his arm straightened, I unleashed a punch of my own!

"Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!"

My heightened strength robbed his attack of its momentum, even forcing him to stagger backward ever so slightly.

This was my chance!

Having secured an opening, I adjusted the Evil Piece inside me and let my Red Dragon Emperor powers explode!

"Welsh Dragonic Rook!"

"Change: Solid Impact!"

My red aura swelled, shrouding my body in thick armor. With my enlarged fist, I dealt my foe a powerful uppercut and, at the same time, discharged the firing hammer in my armor to further turbocharge the strike!

Baaaaannnnngggg!

With an explosive sound, my blow sent Sairaorg flying high into the air!

"Seeing as you don't have any natural weaknesses, my friends went and gave you one! Right there in your arm!"

I adjusted the Evil Piece inside me once more!

"Welsh Blaster Bishop!"

“Change: Fang Blast!”

My armor returned to its usual thickness, equipped now with a backpack and shoulder cannons.

My target was up above—Sairaorg!

Bzzzzz...

With an almost imperceptible sound, the cannons began to charge. This was the Triaina version of my Bishop Promotion, its only drawback being the time required to prime my blasters.

Now, however, with my foe still hurling through the air, I had opportunity enough to prepare!

“Dragon Blasterrrrrrrrr!”

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

I unleashed a huge bombardment of raw power! Sairaorg unfurled his demon wings, attempted to adjust his position, and...

“Gah...!”

...the blast from my left-side cannon missed him by a fraction. However, the one from my right-side one caught him head-on...! Those weapons had fulfilled their purpose, so I let them dissipate in a cloud of red light.

Sairaorg descended to the ground slowly, smoke billowing all around him.

My shoulders were heaving, my breath ragged... As I’d feared, I’d used too much of my strength. And the match wasn’t over yet. I would be in real trouble if I let up.

Sairaorg, having alighted before me, had sustained considerable injuries all over his body. Unfortunately, I hadn’t scored a decisive hit. Immediately before my cannon blast reached him, Sairaorg had shrouded his body in his fighting spirit, the energy that fueled his life force. Such an abundant resource made his defense insane!

He fixed me with an ecstatic grin. “You’re strong. To be *this* formidable...!”

My attack seemed to have satisfied him. But what would I try next? As I

pondered my next move, I heard a scream from behind me.

“Kyah!”

It was the prez! I glanced her way and saw her on her knees, covered in blood! The lion loomed over her.

She was in danger!

“At this rate, Rias Gremory will be retired from blood loss.”

The lion talked! He was capable of speech?

“If you want to save her, you’ll have to use your Phoenix Tears.”

If that beast wanted to, he could finish her now. He was certainly strong enough.

The fact that he hadn’t done so meant that he *wanted* us to use our Phoenix Tears. The Bael Familia had already used theirs, so only ours remained.

The enemy lion was watching the duel between Sairaorg and me with rapt attention, while at the same time, he seemed devoid of care.

“Were I to reprimand you for this, my worth as a King would be called into question,” Sairaorg said. “Very well—I’ll allow it. But my contest with the Red Dragon Emperor is to continue, Regulus.”

“I understand. I’m sorry. I was only trying to serve your interests.”

Neither the lion nor Sairaorg looked like they’d attack. I remained on guard for any sudden movements but sped over to the prez and retrieved the vial of Phoenix Tears from her pocket.

“Prez. Use these.”

“I’m pathetic. I’m... I’m only holding you back...” Her beautiful features were marred with bitter regret.

As our Familia’s King, she couldn’t forgive herself for losing to the other team’s lion Pawn.

She had to keep going, though. If the prez lost here, it would be game over.

I sprinkled the Phoenix Tears over her, and her wounds healed in a puff of

smoke.

Now both teams were in the same boat—neither of us had any restorative items on hand. The only question that remained was whether I could defeat Sairaorg.

Were we evenly matched now? No, the odds were good that we'd be able to win if I used my Triaina again. Sairaorg was injured.

While I considered my next move, the lion called out, *“Master Sairaorg! Equip me! With your Balance Breaker, you’ll be far superior to the Red Dragon Emperor! Don’t throw a match you’re fully capable of winning!”*

Equip? The lion? A Balance Breaker?

“Silence!” Sairaorg roared in indignation. “That’s... I decided only to ever use *that* should an impossible crisis face the underworld! What is there to be gained by using it here, against this foe?! I will fight him, with my body alone!”

He could get even stronger any time he wanted?

If Sairaorg really did go all out...would I be able to win? I was curious. Just how strong *was* he at his absolute best? How overwhelming, how ferocious would this man who'd earned my respect be if he didn't hold anything back?

He'd permitted me to use my Triaina ability, which practically spat in the face of Rating Game rules. At this point, I had no right to ask *him* to restrain himself if he was capable of more.

“Use the lion’s powers,” I said.

The prez was startled by my words, but I went on anyway.

Sorry, everyone. I’m an idiot. I’m throwing away the opportunity you all gave me to win this thing. Yet still...I...!

“There’s no point to this if I can’t reach beyond whatever *that* is. All my training will have been for nothing!” Before I knew it, I was voicing my innermost thoughts. “I *will* beat you today! I *will* snatch victory! We’re fighting for our dreams here! How can we achieve that if my opponent won’t face us at his best?!”

It was a cry straight from the heart.

“Stupid Issei,” the prez muttered, pressing her face against mine.

I’m sorry, Prez. I promise I’ll take responsibility for saying all that and win this thing!

After a moment’s silence, Sairaorg’s lips twisted into a grin. “My apologies. Somehow, I’d convinced myself that this was but a game; that we would always have a second chance. I’ve always been naive in that way. What a foolish thought...” Sairaorg’s body was brimming with energy. “Knowing I may never experience a battle like this again...it fills me with fury. Regulus!”

“Sir!” the lion cried back, answering his master.

The huge lion glowed with golden radiance, transforming into a pillar of light that shot straight for Sairaorg!

“Let’s do this. Today shall be a fight to the death! Bear no grudges should you perish, Issei Hyoudou!” Sairaorg roared as that golden radiance fell upon him. “My lion! King of Nemea! King of lions! Heed my ferocity; robe me in your glory!”

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

The entire battlefield began to shake violently. What was going on? Was this artificial space itself losing its form now that Sairaorg had unleashed his full power...?

The scenery and everything else around him were blown into oblivion as Sairaorg and the lion exploded with strength.

“Balance Breaker! Balance Breeeeeaaaaakeeeeeerrrrr!”

A blinding flash of light flooded the area, forcing the prez and me to cover our eyes.

When it subsided, a man garbed in a full-body suit of golden armor modeled in the shape of a lion stood before us.

The helmet was ringed by a golden mane, fluttering in the wind, and there was an emblem shaped like a lion’s face on its chest, eyes aglow as though possessed of a mind of its own.

“The Regulus Nemea’s Balance Breaker form, the Regulus Rey Leather Rex! I

thank you, Issei Hyoudou, for convincing me to fight unrestricted, and I'll reward you with my fists. Strike at me now with that formidable Rook form of yours!" Sairaorg declared as he moved toward me, one step at a time.

His armor, shrouded in fighting spirit, was nothing short of overwhelming...!

Why did I keep fighting people with insane Balance Breakers?!

"In a sense, you might say forms such as theirs are the epitome of those who favor physical combat. They clad themselves in armor, a tangible incarnation of power, and strike directly. Thus, they end up looking like that," Ddraig explained.

That made sense. If you fought mainly hand-to-hand, good armor could find a keen balance between offense and defense. Come to think of it, my Red Dragon Emperor Scale Mail meant I wasn't really that different.

Sairaorg, now but a short distance away, flashed me a grin. "Now, do your worst."

Don't hate me for doing this! I'll hit you with my power pushed to its max!

"Welsh Dragonic Rook!"

"Change: Solid Impact!"

My armor thickened, my gauntlets growing to many times their original size!

I raised my huge fist into the air and threw it forward, releasing the firing hammer in my elbow to increase my momentum and power!

Gah!

Sairaorg caught my fist effortlessly in his left hand.

—! He parried the blow?! How?! That attack is new and based on a mastery of offense and defense! No, this is only the beginning! Maybe I just need to release the firing hammer once more, further boosting the force of my fist?!

Bang!

As I attempted just that...

Booooooooooom!

...my huge gauntlet was brutally crushed from the impact of slamming against

Sairaorg's palm.

How...? My defenses should be boosted, too...!

"Is this your limit?" Sairaorg whispered.

Crrrraaaaaaaaash!

My foe's fist slammed deep into my armored abdomen, effortlessly breaking the thick plating that was supposed to have shielded me, crushing the body.

"Gah!"

I coughed up a mouthful of blood...and passed out.



...

When I came to, I found myself in a white void.

I knew this place. It was the world inside my Sacred Gear. I'd often come here to try to communicate with my predecessors, the former incarnations of the Red Dragon Emperor.

I was supposed to be out in the real world, engrossed in a fierce battle with Sairaorg.

I'd managed to beat him down pretty well, but he'd decided to fight for real, equipped his lion armor, and rendered my Triaina Rook ineffective...

Glancing around, I spied the Boosted Gear's previous bearers. I expected them to be the same expressionless ghosts they always were.

Yet somehow, their faces radiated resentment, and a thick, dark aura wafted from their forms.

"Juggernaut..."

"...Drive."

"Only your Juggernaut Drive can defeat him now."

They were whispering like total creeps!

My Juggernaut Drive?! What was going on?!

There was an image looming in the sky of that white void... I was there, the

prez holding me in her arms! My armor had been devastated, and there was considerable blood leaking from my mouth. It was clear from a single glance that I'd suffered a fatal wound.

Sairaorg and I had been in the heat of battle. After merging with that lion of his, he'd dealt me a ruinous blow...

Had my consciousness been flung deep into my Sacred Gear...?

"Juggernaut Drive..."

"It's the only option."

"Yes, there's no other way."

"It's what he expects of you."

One after another, my predecessors rose to their feet, looking my way with ominous smiles as their black auras grew ever stronger.

—!

My body was starting to emanate a similar aura, too! At the same time, I could feel successive waves of negative emotions churning inside me.

What's going on...?

Resentment... Pain... Hatred... They were all swelling up inside me.

That man... Sairaorg... I *hated* him!

I wanted to crush him...! I craved power...! Absolute hegemony...!

I had to eliminate him...erase him from the face of the earth...!

Ugh... Elsha... Belzard... I... I...!

Just as my heart was on the verge of being consumed by those dark emotions, I heard voices crying out from the scene above. Children.

"You can't die, Breast Dragon!"

"Nooooo!"

"Stand up!"

One sad cry after another.

I'm sorry, everyone. I can't go on any longer...

Before the darkness could dominate my consciousness, a single voice cut through that white void. *"Don't cry!"*

A kid...?

The image above me shifted, displaying a young boy wearing a familiar cap.

I recognized him immediately... He was the same child who'd been weeping his eyes out because he couldn't attend the autograph session at the hero show...

The boy—Lirenkus—was shouting at his tearful peers in the audience. *"That's what the Breast Dragon told me! He said men don't cry! You need to be strong! You need to get back up to protect the girls around you, no matter how many times you fall to the ground!"*

—.

Those were the same words I'd said to reassure him when he'd been in tears.

At this declaration, the other children stood in the stadium.

"Don't lose, Breast Dragon! Breast Dragon! Breast Dragon!"

"Breasts! Get up! Breast Dragon!"

"Breasts!"

"Breast Dragon!"

"Breeeeeeaaaaast Draaaaagonnnnnnn!"

They were calling out for me so desperately...

Among the cheers, there was a slightly older one I recognized.

It was Irina, encouraging the children in the audience.

"That's it, everyone! Issei—the Breast Dragon—has always stood again to defeat formidable enemies! So let's give him our support! We've got to believe in him! The Breast Dragon is everyone's hero!" Between sniffles, Irina desperately appealed to all the kids. *"Everyone, do you love the Breast Dragon?"*

“““Yes!”””

“I love him, too! I know he’s a dirty, lecherous pervert, and he only ever has sex on his mind, but even so... He’s more passionate than anyone, he never gives up, he always works so hard, and he fights to the end for the people he loves! You all know that, don’t you?”

“““Yes!”””

“Then let’s cheer him on! Let’s make sure he hears our voices! Breast Dragon! You’ve got to keep going! Fight for everyone in Heaven and the underworld!”

“Breasts!”

“Breasts! Breasts!”

“Everyone, with me! Breasts!”

“““Breasts! Breasts! Breasts!”””

“““Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts! Breasts!”””

Before I knew it, I was crying.

I could hear so many voices calling out to me, of people who needed me, of children sending me their support.

That was when it happened...

I heard another voice, one that struck a chord in my memory. It belonged to the person who was always by my side, constantly encouraging me.

“Hey, Issei. Can you hear me? Everyone’s calling out for you.”

The image shifted, and the face of my master appeared above.

A wave of crimson flooded my vision...

It was the same color as her hair. Crimson—more vivid than the usual strawberry blond.

Yes, her long, beautiful deep-red locks were always there...

When I’d been on the verge of death, that brilliant color had filled my vision.

The same color as my blood, yet different now. Noble, gentle, and warm.

That dazzling crimson embraced me...

It all began with that incredible color.

"I do, too, you know. I need you as well. I mean, I..."

The woman I loved—Rias Gremory.

I loved her... And as my thoughts turned to her, a dark voice clawed at me.

"Now, Red Dragon Emperor, Issei Hyoudou. Rampage. Activate your Juggernaut Drive."

One of the former Red Dragon Emperors, emanating that evil aura, called out.

However, the sounds of those encouraging voices grew louder.

"Breast Dragon!"

"You can do it!"

"Stand up!"

"Breasts!"

"Breasts!"

I could also make out *his* voice.

"What's the matter, Issei Hyoudou? Is this the end? Are you finished? I hope not. Stand up and show me what you've got. Don't tell me your dreams are so feeble!"

Right. I wasn't done yet. I wouldn't let it end here! I could still fight!

My predecessors seemingly heard Sairaorg and the kids, but their malevolent auras refused to abate.

"Now, let's destroy him. Take these powers of domination, of—"

"Shut up," I said, glaring at the former Red Dragon Emperors. "Can't you hear them? Those voices are calling for *me*. And it's not just the prez—there's lots of children as well."

"No. It is the destiny of all Heavenly Dragons to become Dragon Dynasts."

What you seek is impossible."

"No it isn't. I... I won't be some monster! I'm Issei Hyoudou! A perverted lecher! I'll be a king of the obscene! Watch me!"

"No. You are a hegemonic dragon, the Red Dragon Dynast. The means to domination have been embedded within your Sacred Gear since time immemorial—"

"Why not let him?" offered a fresh voice, interrupting my predecessor.

The new figure was a man enveloped in white light.

The former Red Dragon Emperor who'd been trying to tempt me exploded with rage. *"You...!"*

The luminous man turned to me. *"I was Albion, in a prior age."*

—. *What...? Albion...? Is he a previous incarnation of the White Dragon Emperor?*

"When you combined a fragment of Albion's sacred jewel into your Boosted Gear, you must have taken some of my residual thoughts with it. I should be in the Divine Dividing."

Ah, that made sense! He was here because a while back, I'd forcefully embedded a piece of the Divine Dividing into my Sacred Gear!

The former Albion held out his hand. *"This must be fate, Red Dragon Emperor. Allow me to help. I'll use my powers of dividing to suppress the dark force churning through the Boosted Gear."*

"Are you sure? I'm the Red Dragon Emperor, not Vali..."

The former Albion broke into a soft grin. *"You're intriguing. I can see now how the two strongest Red Dragon Emperors were able to fade away with smiles in their hearts. If you have the passion and humor to drive away the curse, you may be able to ascend as a Heavenly Dragon, perhaps even take both Heavenly Dragons to new heights. And I'd like to help."* He held his hand aloft, and light gathered around it. *"You and Vali Lucifer must become new dragons."*

A flash of pale-silver radiance flooded the white void, dispelling the evil auras of the previous Red Dragon Emperors. The oppressive animosity bearing down

on me was suddenly reduced by half!

Albion's power of dividing carved through the hatred, resentment, and enmity, reducing it all in successive waves!

"No! Scorn! Grief! Despair! They're supposed to lie at the heart of the Red Dragon Emperor's Sacred Gear! To be consumed by the curse, to breathe indignation, that is the way of a Heavenly Dragon!"

I faced my predecessor, who continued decrying me with hateful words. "Breasts—they're what saved me. I'm going to keep on chasing after them."

Having failed to drive me berserk, the former Red Dragon Emperors took a last stand and began to chant their Juggernaut Drive curse.

"As the Heavenly Dragon who usurped God's hegemony..."

No! I have my own chant!

"As the Heavenly Dragon who has cast aside dreams of domination!"

"I scorn the infinite, lament the illusion..."

"I'll embrace my infinite hopes and dreams and trek the royal road to kingdom!"

"I am the Red Dragon Dynast..."

"I am the Crimson Dragon King!"

"I shall plunge you into the frigid depths of the Hell of the Scarlet Lotus!"

"And I swear to you this! I'll lead you all to a glittering crimson future!"

My predecessors seemed to lighten at this final line. *"Future? You'll show us... the future?"*

"That's right! Just watch me! I'm going to show you all! My friends! The women I adore! Those kids! I'll show *everyone* the future I've got in store!"

"A future... Not destroying...but creating...a future!"

Yep! If we all worked together, we could pull it off!

"Let's go, friends! I'm the Red Dragon Emperor, the Breast Dragon, and I'm absolutely in love with Rias Gremory! I'm Issei Hyoudooooouuuuu!"

In the image hanging overhead, the prez's breasts released a crimson glow, a warm aura that embraced my body...

Life.MAXIMUM vs Power.MAXIMUM

Crimson and Red

Crimson...

I was being held tight inside a deep-red aura.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on the ground, caught in the crimson embrace spilling out from the prez's breasts.

Her chest was aglow! Yep, her boobs were positively shining!

She seemed even more surprised than I was.

"Issei... What happened...?"

She was staring back at me, wide-eyed.

Huh? I glanced down at my body. *Is my armor slightly darker in color now?*

Rather than red, it was now a vivid crimson, the same hue as the prez's hair. The shape was also a little different.

"Whoa!" the announcer cried. *"The Switch Princess's breasts just let out a flash of light, washing over the Red Dragon Emperor, and his armor transformed! He's getting back to his feet!"*

Had I been revived? I was...uninjured. My wounds were gone! My broken armor was restored!

I'd met the former incarnations of the Red Dragon Emperor, my predecessors, in the white void of my Sacred Gear and had nearly been consumed by their wicked emotions. Yet those children, the prez, and Albion had called me back.

"Partner!"

Ah, Ddraig. What happened?

"Your consciousness was blasted into the depths of your Sacred Gear. I tried to

follow you down there, but the memories of your previous generations were too strong. They kept me out. The next thing I knew, we were here! What happened down there? Most of the curse has been released!"

Right, the curse... I have Albion to thank for that.

"You mean you took some of his residual thoughts when you stole his jewel? And they've taken root in your Sacred Gear...?"

It looks that way. I don't really understand all the details, but he helped me.

"And you Promoted to a Queen when you freed your Red Dragon Emperor powers, too?"

Huh? I'm a Queen right now?

I hurriedly checked the Evil Piece inside me.

It was true. I could hardly contain my shock. It should have been impossible, yet my Evil Piece had transformed into a True Queen!

At that moment, Azazel spoke over the live commentary feed. *"That red aura... No, it's more vivid, more noble than just any old red. It's a crimson aura... Yes, crimson. The same color as the Crimson Satan. The same as the woman that dim-witted idiot fell for..."*

He was right. My armor was now a vivid shade, deeper in hue than its previous red.

"Only he could pull off a miracle like this...! Hold on, wasn't he supposed to power up by sucking on Rias's breasts?!"

As if! That skeevy fallen angel! That rumor was due to a misunderstanding at our press conference! And then it turned into the main headline in the morning newspapers! I mean, I *wanted* to suck them! I really did! But it was all a mistake!

Having observed my transformation, Sairaorg, still clad in his lion armor, said, "So that's the Cardinal Crimson Queen. The exact same color as the Crimson Satan and Rias's fine hair."

I exhaled deeply. Somehow, the words came so easily to me now. Or rather, Azazel's crazy outburst had already laid my feelings bare!

“It’s the color of the woman I love—the prez, Rias Gremory. I want to win for her. I’ll defend her. I’ll fight for her. I love her!”

There, I said it! I finally said it!

I didn’t care what happened next! I was going to confess to her!

I raised my voice to the heavens!

“I’ll crush you, for all the kids watching and for the woman I love! For my dreams! For the kids’ dreams! For Rias Gremory’s dreams! I’m going to surpass you! Because I love Rias Gremoryyyyy!”

The prez’s face turned redder than I’d ever seen before, but she finally knew how I felt. That declaration was the naked truth, and she could do with it as she liked!

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Sairaorg broke out into bales of laughter. “It looks like that light bleeding from Rias’s chest has awakened something in you. Very well. In that case, *I* shall defeat *you* and make you a stepping stone to achieve *my* dreams!”

I wreathed myself in that intense crimson aura and took off at breakneck speed!

“Star Sonic Booster!”

My explosive dash all but blasted the surrounding scenery away, my speed comparable to when I entered my Triaina Knight form. Yet something told me I could push myself even faster. Perhaps I would with a little more training?

Sairaorg’s fighting spirit covered his body as he prepared to meet me head-on.

“Solid Impact Booster!”

I lashed out with the same chain of offensive and defensive moves I used with my Triaina Rook Promotion! This time, however, I was consuming much less energy! There was still ample room to grow here! Could I use this to get even stronger?!

“No, your armor’s defenses in your new state haven’t stabilized yet! You’re like a crab that just shed its shell! If you overdo it, you’ll suffer immense damage!”

Huh?! Really, Ddraig?! But I won't stand a chance of beating this guy if I don't give it my all!

I had to hit him! And he hit me back! Again and again, we lashed out at each other!

Our faces, our stomachs, our chests, our arms. Blow after blow, we struck each other with all our strength. Whenever one of our armors cracked, that person hurriedly fixed it while the other targeted that weakness. Each blow we dealt each other pierced through our bodies. Every hit shook the earth, blowing gaping holes through the artificial dimension battlefield.

It was a ridiculously straightforward contest, a show of equally ludicrous power.

I paid no heed to defense. There was no time to spare for it. I only had to hit Sairaorg... Yet no matter how many times I did so, he refused to quit.

That meant I just had to continue! A battered body wasn't enough to end this!

We had to see it through, to continue until one of us knocked the other's soul from their bones and rendered them unconscious!

"It's an insane fistfight!" the announcer cried. "A ferocious punch-out is taking place in the center of the field! There are no fancy tactics on show here, folks! No fine-tuned demonic powers, either! It's a red and raw slugfest, a schoolyard dustup of epic proportions! They're striking at each other and taking impossible blows in turn—that's all there is to it! Yet they're going at it with such incredible power that the battlefield is falling to pieces! Look at the grandstands! Everyone in the audience has risen to their feet! Demons of all ages are watching this raging contest, each on tenterhooks! It's unbelievable!"

""""Sairaorg! Sairaaaaaooooorg!""""

""""Breast Dragon! Breast Dragooooon!""""

Huh. So the spectators are just as riled up?

If this clumsy exchange was enough to light their passions, then I'd keep at it! I would hit my opponent as many times as I had to!

“Partner! That True Queen state hasn’t fully permeated through your body yet! You’ll be able to increase your power further from here on out, but if you don’t stop, your Balance Breaker will end before you know it!”

You have to stop that from happening, Ddraig! Just a little while longer!

I couldn’t afford to lose...

I had to knock Sairaorg off his feet and press on! For the prez! For me!

“I...will...beat you! And I’ll rise up...as high as I can go!”

My crimson aura enshrouded my right arm, transforming it alone to its Triaina Rook mode! Immediately, I released the firing hammer, my fist crashing forward!

“Solid Impact Booster!”

The punch slammed hard into Sairaorg’s stomach, crushing his lion armor and digging deep into his gut!

I’d dealt him the same kind of heavy blow that he’d given me!

Having taken the full brunt of that strike, Sairaorg’s legs trembled, and he collapsed to his knees. It looked like he’d suffered severe damage.

“My legs?! What are you doing?!” Sairaorg cried in a fit of rage. “Why are you shaking?! We’re not finished here! This is just the beginning!”

He pulled himself back upright and took a heavy step forward. His body was still encased in his fighting spirit, although the amount had visibly decreased.

I could feel it! I could win! I could beat this guy! Victory was within my grasp!

Sairaorg certainly wasn’t about to make it simple, however.

“Endure! Endure, dammit...!” he shouted at himself. “How can I call myself heir to the princely House of Bael if I can’t even pull through this...?!”

What incredible determination...! But I was no different! I wouldn’t be able to press forward if I didn’t emerge from this contest on top!

I readied another punch at the charging Sairaorg, then pulled my arm back and fired off with a low kick at his thigh. Thanks to my feint, my foe left himself open for a brief moment, and in my extreme new state, I scored a successful

strike!

That maneuver was all thanks to my daily training! Boy, was I glad all that effort hadn't been in vain!

Thump!

Punching through Sairaorg's armor, I tore straight into his calves! His legs had been trembling, so I intended to make them my primary target! Sairaorg faltered, and I immediately seized upon that, driving my fist into his face!

The blow broke clean through his helmet, its momentum sending him flying away. I spread my dragon wings wide and manifested a set of cannons. In my new Queen form, those weapons were housed inside my wings.

Vrrrr-rrrrr...

With a quiet hum, energy gathered in the barrels much faster than it would have using my Triaina Bishop form!

"Do you remember what Azazel said earlier? That lion's Sacred Gear is supposed to be resistant to projectiles! You'll probably be better off focusing on a single point rather than blasting the whole area, don't you think?"

Good idea, Ddraig! I narrowed my target as much as possible, concentrating on a precise spot.

"Crimson Blaaaaasteeeeeerrrrr!"

"Fang Blast Booster!"

A crimson aura flooded out, all but consuming Sairaorg in a mighty explosion! The smoke cleared to reveal an incredible crater with Sairaorg's body at the center. There was no sign of any movement. My demonic bombardment had gotten through!

The audience erupted in a frenzy.

My opponent had taken considerable damage and was undoubtedly incapable of standing. Sairaorg must have expended his remaining strength withstanding my attack.

At that moment, a figure—a woman—appeared, swaying unsteadily as she

approached Sairaorg...

She stood beside him, and although I couldn't hear what she was saying, it was clear she was calling to him.

Curiously, no one else had noticed her. Was she only visible to me? Did that make her a ghost? A lingering memory?

"...Please."

Her voice was soft, but there was an unmistakable firmness to it.

—. Something incredible was taking place before my eyes...

Sairaorg moved slightly, eventually raising his head. His face was a mess.

Although his eyes were vacant, I sensed the strength behind them.

The woman spoke to him again. *"Sairaorg."*

Was she his mother? Looking carefully, I realized that her face was identical to the sleeping one I'd seen at the hospital.

From what I could gather at this distance, Sairaorg didn't see her. Had she sent only her consciousness here...? She drew near her son, as though to protect him.

Her lips formed words only I caught, yet they weren't the gentle encouragement of a mother who cared deeply for her son as he fought furiously.

"Stand up. Get back on your feet! Sairaorg!"

The woman's expression was stern, proud, and stout of heart. Her voice wasn't soothing, but that of a scolding parent.

"You promised me you would become stronger than anyone else, didn't you?"

—.

Sairaorg's body began to move slightly. Little by little, his hands, arms, and legs twitched until he could lift himself.

"Fulfill your dream! Isn't that why you've held so desperately to your fists? For your dreams? For the underworld? To save others from the hardships you

experienced?”

I had no way of knowing whether those words reached Sairaorg. Perhaps he couldn't hear her.

“A world where anyone, regardless of birth, can achieve success, so long as they have the necessary ability— isn't that what you want to create? A place where children of the underworld don't know the tears of hardship? Are you going to make it a reality?!”

Sairaorg's mother slowly faded, a smile on her face—an expression of pride for her beloved son.

“Now go, my boy. My sweet Sairaorg.”

The man in the crater stood upright, planting his feet firmly on the ground as blood gushed from his wounds.

“Aaaaauuuuuggggghhhhh!”

The lion equipped to him roared in answer. *“Roouooooaaaaarrrrr!”*

It was a majestic yet sorrowful sound. The Nemean Lion's cry was crystal-clear.

The ground trembled beneath my feet, shaking me to my very core.

Fear and dread—or was it elation and excitement? A myriad of contradictory emotions swirled within me, every cell in my body seemingly at a boil.

I could still fight this opponent.

I could settle this. That thought sent a wave of power surging through my being, coursing through my skin.

“Issei Hyoudou! I won't lose! I can't! I have a dream I need to make come true!”

Sairaorg was coming right at me! He was bruised and weary, yet still he ran!

“I—I'm not about to lose, either!” I shouted, leaping forward.
“Sairaaaaaooooorg!”

Our fists slammed hard into each other's faces! How many times had we struck each other like this? Dammit! It hurt like hell!

But my foe refused to go down. I hit him again and again, but he wouldn't fall. The glimmer in his eyes refused to die as he hurled punch after punch right back at me with such force that each strike seemed to tear my bones.

Where on earth is he getting all this extra power from...?!

I hit Sairaorg in the stomach and flat in the head, yet it did little to slow him down.

Were I to pause for so much as a second...he would crush me! Sairaorg would knock me out cold!

What did I have to do to render him unconscious first?! How many times would I have to hit this guy to take him down?!

He was the heir to the princely House of Bael, despite lacking his family's characteristic powers of destruction! But while he may have lacked abilities the prez and Sirzechs possessed, he was no less terrifying an opponent!

This was no good! If my mind accepted defeat for a split second, it'd spell my loss for sure!

Vali was a formidable opponent, and so was Cao.

Sairaorg... He had strength, speed, and an incredible defense. Yet he was different from the other two in one important way—that fanatical obsession with victory.

Defeat here meant it was all over. There'd be no second chances. Sairaorg was prepared to die today, to stake everything on his dream.

His unfaltering spirit, having long since abandoned the notion of retreat, was what had pushed him to these extremes!

"All I have is this body. So if I lose, everything I've worked to achieve, all my accomplishments, will be forfeit. Having failed to inherit my family's power of destruction, my only path forward is through victory. I have no choice but to triumph with these fists."

"It might not be particularly cool or flashy, but clumsy as it is, that's how I intend to face you."

He was incredible! He was so awesome that I could hardly put my thoughts

into words!

That was why... That was why I had to beat him!

I couldn't claim to understand the experiences he'd suffered over the course of his life. I refused to allow myself to be swayed by sympathy and continued to lash out with my fists!

I respected Sairaorg too much to hold back! My response was to meet his might head-on!

"...Haaaah... Haaaah... I...have a dream, too...! To make the prez...the champion...of the Rating Game...!"

My strength was fading. I could feel my armor about to dissipate. Nonetheless, I stepped forward, aiming another punch at my target.

"And I... I'll become a King...one day! I'll be stronger than anyone else! Me! I'll be the mightiest of Pawns! Arghhhhh!"

Thud!

My punch connected with Sairaorg's face, sending a shock to his very core.

The blow pushed him back, and he swayed unsteadily, but he didn't fall.

Just one more hit...

That's when my body gave in, and my Balance Breaker deactivated.

Damn... I only needed a little longer... Is this the end...?

I staggered, trying to focus my remaining power.

It was working! I still had a chance! So long as I could still raise my hand, I could keep fighting!

Just as I was about to throw my arm forward, the lion head emblem in the center of Sairaorg's suit of armor spoke.

"Red Dragon Emperor... You can stop now. My master, Sairaorg... He's..."
Tears fell from the lion head's eyes.

"Sairaorg...?"

My foe, fists still raised as though to unleash another punch, lurched toward

me. He'd passed out, yet I spied a grin on his face, and his eyes still burned with fighting spirit.

"My master... He lost consciousness a short moment ago..."

What...? Then how is he still moving...?

"He's filled with such joy...", the lion explained. *"He kept pushing on... He was having the time of his life, fighting with his dreams on the line..."*

Strength of will alone...kept him going? Even though he blacked out...?

Sairaorg's body had quit, but he kept pushing forward for his dream...

I bowed my head to him. Then I wrapped my arms around his battered body and cried, my voice quivering, "Thank you... Thank you...!"

"Sairaorg Bael has retired, conceding the match. Rias Gremory's team wins!"

Cheers overflowed from the audience as the arbiter issued his final ruling.

Emperor

After the match, Emperor Diehauser Belial held an interview with the media.

“It was good match,” he said. “I expect both Familias to quickly rise to the upper rankings once they enter the professional league. I think we’ve witnessed the birth of a new era today.”

After the interview, a reporter had a question for the ranking number one. “If Sairaorg Bael had ordered his Pawn to defeat Rias Gremory in the final round, wouldn’t he have won?”

“Was that ever an option, in front of such an impassioned audience? Everyone wanted to see a showdown between the Red Heavenly Dragon and the princely scion born without demonic powers. Even a child could have understood that much. No one would have been satisfied had it ended any other way.”

The reporters had no response.

Lionheart

When I awoke, I found myself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling.

“...Where am I?”

I glanced around, realizing that I was lying in a hospital bed and covered in bandages. More than my wounds, it was intense exhaustion that held me down. I doubted I had so much as an ounce of endurance left in me... I couldn't even muster enough strength to clench my fists.

My last memories were the end of the match, the arbiter announcing our side's victory... Had I passed out after that?

“Looks like you're awake.”

I recognized that voice! I turned to my side...and saw Sairaorg, likewise heavily bandaged.

“Sairaorg... We're in neighboring beds?”

“Quite the coincidence, I'm sure. There should be plenty of private hospital rooms available. Maybe Lord Sirzechs or Governor Azazel decided to put us together so we can spar with words until we're both recovered?”

Ha-ha-ha... I didn't want to get involved in another fight, not from these sickbeds...

“I lost...,” Sairaorg muttered. “It isn't all bad, though. This may be my first taste of true defeat. I don't remember the end of the match. I simply woke up here.”

“Me too... To be honest, my memory is all over the place.”

“One thing is clear, though. That was the best fight I've ever had.”

It certainly had been an invigorating contest.

“I’m all busted up, and so are you. Yet for some reason, I feel really good.”

Though we were both covered in bandages, we exchanged bright grins. That’s when someone entered the room.

“Excuse me.”

It was a crimson-haired man—Sirzechs.

“Sirzechs.”

“Hey, Issei, Sairaorg. That was a truly wonderful match. I mean it. The other higher-ups were all pleased as well. It was a joy to see two bright young stars fighting for their futures.”

Sirzechs took a seat nearby as he showered praise on the both of us. “Now then, I have something to tell you, Issei. Do you mind, Sairaorg?”

“Not at all... Do you want me to go outside?”

“No, you can stay here. There’s no harm in you hearing this.” Sirzechs turned back to me, his expression serious. “Issei, there’s talk of promoting you.”

...

I couldn’t quite grasp what he meant by that.

Nonetheless, the Demon King continued: “Strictly speaking, there has been discussion of promoting you, Kiba, and Akeno. You’ve fended off a swath of terrorist attacks, responded to the incident during the peace summit between the three great powers, resisted the forces of the old demon regime, and defeated the evil god Loki. Those plus your deeds in Kyoto and your splendid Rating Game have made it all but certain. The three of you should expect to rise up in status soon. Congratulations. It’s very unusual to be promoted so quickly in this day and age.” Sirzechs wore an expression of true joy.

...

“Huh...?”

That was the only sound I could bring myself to make as the truth finally dawned on me.

H-h-hold on...! So I was going to be...p-p-promoted?!

“Me?! Promoted?! What?! You don’t mean like a Pawn’s Promotion ability, right? You’re talking about a noble title of my own?!”

Sirzechs grinned. “You’ve earned it. You’re still missing a few important qualities, but you have a *very* promising future ahead.”

I didn’t know what to say...

Sairaorg, however, added, “Take it, Issei Hyoudou. This is the fruit of your accomplishments. It doesn’t matter where you were born or what your connections are. You...you were meant to be the hero of the underworld.”

How was I supposed to reply to *that*?!

Sirzechs, perhaps noticing my confusion, gave me a wry kind of look. “Hmm. I’ll send you the details before too long. I want to follow the proper customs when we promote you. We still need to decide the venue and some other technical matters. But that’s all for now. I’ll leave you to it.”

With those final words, the Demon King left the room.

Now it was only Sairaorg and me again.

I had to be dreaming. A promotion? Me?

I-it was certainly my dream, my heartfelt goal, but I’d never thought I’d achieve it so quickly...

Uh-oh! What am I going to do?! What’s the next step?!

“Your promotion is all well and good, but Rias should come before that,” Sairaorg declared. “You love her, don’t you?”

The conversation had suddenly turned to the prez. I should have expected as much. I’d blurted out my feelings in front of such a huge audience!

“Um... Yes. I do.”

“Then why don’t you tell her how you feel again? Just the two of you this time. You’ve already informed the rest of the world, so it’s about time you let her know in private.”

I *had* kinda just lobbed it at her... The heat of battle had brought it out of me without warning. Talking to her alone, telling her how I felt with no one else

around...that would be something else entirely!

“Can I...? Can I...?” I hemmed and hawed. “Can I really afford to be so confident?”

“If it doesn’t work out, come see me. You can cry yourself out at my place over a cup of coffee.”

“Thank you, Sairaorg. I—I...!”

Faced with his generosity, I wept tears of gratitude.

Today, we’d staked our dreams and hurled punches at each other. Next time, it would be a nice chat.

Indra

After wrapping up the commentary for the match, I—Azazel—made my way toward one of the private viewing rooms set aside for visiting dignitaries.

Although one of my subordinates had informed me that a certain guest had come to watch, providing expert analysis on the events of the match had kept me in my seat until the Rating Game was over.

There were several reserved boxes in the stadium, and from what I gathered, they'd all been occupied during this fight. That old geezer Odin took the Valhalla Room, while Zeus and Poseidon had claimed the Olympus Room, all of them bringing full guard retinues.

I was presently en route to another one of those special rooms.

Just as I arrived, I all but bumped into the man I was hoping to meet as he exited the private box surrounded by his security detail. His close-cropped hair was adorned with a pair of round sunglasses. A Buddhist rosary hung above his aloha shirt. It was a remarkably casual outfit...not that I was one to talk.

He was the Heavenly Emperor Sakra.

"Well if it isn't Sakra. How did you find the game?"

"Oh? Yo! Hey there, my fallen angel brother of justice! That was a smokin' hot match, you know what I'm sayin'? First you get all cozy with the new demon regime, then your prodigy snatches the win? You must be pretty pleased, am I right? And Team Gremory is *out there*. Put 'em up against any average team, and they'd wipe the floor with 'em!"

As always, his voice dripped with snark. He ranked among the strongest entities of all the major powers. He was the Heavenly Emperor, the deity of war who'd defeated the god Asura...

There was something I felt compelled to ask him. It concerned the Hero Faction's terrorist attack on Kyoto.

"I have a question for you."

"Ha-ha-ha! What is it, my fallen angel brother of justice? If I can help ya, ask away!"

"Did you know about Cao Cao and that Longinus of his before we did?"

According to Issei, the old Sun Wukong from Sakra's camp had known about Cao Cao since the trumped-up hero with that ultimate Holy Spear was a kid. Sakra's people had kept in contact with Cao Cao all that time while we'd been in the dark.

Sakra's lips curled in a suggestive grin. "So what if I did? Whaddaya gonna do 'bout it? Who cares if I know the little punk? You mad 'cause I never told ya? Or maybe... 'cause you never picked up on it?"

Bastard. Mouthing off at me like that...! He'd basically admitted to it...!

"Indra...!" I called out, my voice heavy with rage.

Sakra broke into a smirk. "Ha-ha-ha! You think you're clever, callin' me that? Come on, Aza-boy, you don't gotta look so grim. If you're gonna blow your top, do it over Hades's plot to redraw the balance of power. That's a way bigger deal, don'cha think?"

He knows about Hades, too...? Just how familiar is he with all these events...?

Sakra stuck out his finger, pointing at me. "Lemme tell ya this, kiddo. *Peace* and *compromise* might be the buzzwords of the day, but deep down, everyone thinks their own mythology is the strongest and that the others can go drop dead. Those old sticks-in-the-mud, Odin and Zeus, are particularly naive. Come on, I know your game. It's a helluva lot easier to bring humans together in belief if you've got fewer gods for 'em to worship. Leave the other faiths to rot, am I right? Just how many deities have kicked the bucket, have been reduced to folk legend, all 'cause you guys came in guns a-blazin' and stole all their believers? You'd better brush up on your ancient myths. Gods hold on to their grudges a helluva lot longer than humans do, you catch my drift?"

I understood well enough. Even if the representatives of the other pantheons were willing to join us in negotiation, there was no telling what they were really thinking. If they saw a chance, they'd definitely take it. But it was the principle that mattered here!

If the balance among the various powers was thrown into disarray, the human realm could very easily be laid to waste...!

Sakra sighed. "Look, I'll lend ya a hand for appearance's sake. Ophis and their friends are gettin' to be a pain in the ass."

Ophis and their friends? Was Cao Cao included in that group, too...?

"Give your Breast Dragon a message for me, will ya? That was an awesome fight. If he ever threatens my world, I'll annihilate him down to his very soul. We've got enough *heavenly* beings over there already. We don't need any more."

Having said all he cared to, Sakra made his departure.

Sakra... Hades... The world, it seemed, was still in a dangerous place.

Ophis, those black serpents of yours are still getting people drunk on all the power you're giving them. They're becoming a danger to all of us. Your dreams... could end up plunging the world into chaos.

New Life

“Please line up in single file!” Asia, dressed in a cute waitress outfit, called to the students standing in the corridor.

The line for the café snaked into the distance.

“Yes, step up to the fortune-telling hall and purification corner! Let Koneko Toujou and Akeno Himejima see to all your soothsaying and purification needs!” Irina, standing at Asia’s side, was busy gathering customers to the various attractions.

The day of the Academy Festival had finally arrived, and we members of the Occult Research Club were putting the old school building to full use! So far, it had been a resounding success! Not only did we have guys visiting to admire our beautiful girls, we had a huge number of female guests and a great number of non-students as well. Yep, our beauties sure were popular!

“Say *cheese*!”

The prez was in a waitress outfit, too, busily snapping photographs.

We’d devised a system where people could have their photograph taken with our club members, and it proved exceedingly popular. Admittedly, no one had asked for a picture with me yet... As far as most folks were concerned, I was just a lecherous, perverted teenager!

I didn’t care, though. The sight of the prez in her waitress outfit was so dazzling that it practically brought tears to my eyes! Naturally, guests could get a photo with her on request as well.

“Issei, don’t just stand there. Come and help,” Kiba called, poking his head out from the classroom we had transformed into our haunted house.

I was supposed to play the role of Frankenstein’s monster. I even had to wear makeup to look the part. Gasper, incidentally, was dressed as Dracula, but it ended up making him look cuter than usual rather than anything remotely

frightening.

“I’m going to help out at the café, so I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Right, right.”

Every last one of our attractions was a great success, so whenever we had a spare moment, it was spent shuffling back and forth to assist the others.

Now then, it was time for me to become our very own monster.

Ah, more women visitors!

“Graaah!”

I leaped out to surprise them, but...

“Eeeek! It’s that pervert, Hyoudou! He’s going to defile us!”

Slap!

...I kept getting hit square on the cheek.

“Boo, I’m Dracula! Your blood is mine!”

“Eeeek! Gaspy! You’re adorable!”

Yep, Gasper was a hit with the girls... Damn him!

“Ah, here he is! Let’s do in Hyoudou before he can get us!”

Slap!

Yet again, I suffered a smack across the cheek. I hadn’t even jumped out to scare them this time!

Why did this only ever happen to me...?

While cursing my unjust fate, I endured the tenth strike on my face today.



“No... You’re saying all the higher-ups who backed Sairaorg have withdrawn their support?”

I was spending my break chatting with Azazel, who was stationed by the ticket office on the first floor.

The topic of our conversation was none other than Sairaorg.

Apparently, he'd lost several important connections that could have helped him rise to the top after losing.

"Yeah, that's the way it goes. People don't flock to second-best, and demons are calculating by nature. As soon as someone drops in worth, they're liable to get thrown to the wayside."

That was awful. I couldn't believe people had abandoned him so quickly...

"But he fought so well..."

"Don't regret winning, you hear me? You don't need to worry about someone who did all that fighting only with his bare hands. You got the better of him. That's how it goes in the demon world. Only strength has value. If you and Rias are gonna get serious about Rating Games, you'd better get used to this."

"What about his position as heir to the House of Bael?"

"Nothing's changed there. Who knows how *they'll* react to all this, but even without his family's powers of destruction, Sairaorg's still incredibly capable. Besides, he has public opinion on his side. The family won't be able to pass him over so easily."

That came as a relief. At least he was still in line to inherit his family's titles.

The Gremory Familia had won. We'd emerged as the strongest demon youths.

We'd gained so much, but the losers had forfeited something of value in exchange.

So this is the way of things in demon society... Ah!

I suddenly remembered there was something that I'd been meaning to tell Azazel.

"Teach. I've realized something, a new potential... I didn't get a chance to try it out during the Rating Game, though."

"Has it got something to do with Kiba's Sacred Gear—his new Balance Breaker?"

"Yes. I also have some of the White Dragon Emperor's strength, so I figured maybe..."

I couldn't help but wonder whether I might be able to do something similar. I mean, I *had* communicated with a past incarnation of Albion during the match.

"...That sounds incompatible with your abilities. Trying to develop a divide technique would risk putting your life in danger all over again. And even if you *did* manage to activate it, it could render you unable to use your Red Dragon Emperor powers."

Sacred Gears had a way of responding to strong and unwavering thoughts. Maybe it would all depend on training and being able to properly visualize what I wanted to accomplish? Still, it would be a real handicap if it stopped me from using my Red Dragon Emperor abilities. Kiba had been unable to use his regular techniques while making use of his new Balance Breaker. Maybe something could be done about that with time and effort?

There was also the chance of developing a variant-type Sacred Gear. But could I do it? The thought filled me with uncertainty. Kiba had achieved it, so it wasn't impossible! We would have to get back to training together!

"Just keep leveling up and work on your True Queen. Perfect it. There's still a lot of room for you to grow."

Azazel was right. This was just the beginning. I'd managed to force the door open, and now the secrets inside were spilling out. For now, the best thing was to keep working so those potentialities became realized!

While I mulled all that over, who should appear but those two idiots, Matsuda and Motohama.

"Yo, Issei! We can't get into your occult mansion!"

"Dammit... The fortune teller, the exorcist, the café—wherever we go, it's one queue after the next! Issei, you wouldn't be able to spare a couple of VIP tickets, would you?"

The pair closed in on me.

Yep, our occult mansion was proving to be one of the most popular events at the Academy Festival, with people lining up to enter every attraction. Seeing as we had so many beauties among our ranks, and that pretty boy Kiba, guys and girls alike were eager to visit.

We'd prepared a huge number of tickets, yet we we'd still sold out almost immediately. Ravel was busy making more.

"Hang in there," Azazel said as he took his leave. He was supposed to be responsible for supervising the Academy Festival, but from what I could tell, he was just going around enjoying himself!

"Here are the new tickets, Issei."

"Ah. Thanks, Ravel."

No sooner did I remove the SOLD OUT sign from the ticket counter than I was flooded by customers. Where had they all been hiding?!

"One ticket, please!"

"For the fortune teller, right?"

Fortunately, Ravel looked to be having fun, so I guess all was well.

"...Issei," she called from the counter. "I was really impressed by what you did during the match... When I saw you hug your opponent at the end, I almost broke into tears..."

Her cheeks had turned scarlet. Where was this coming from...?

"Y-yeah. Ha-ha. I was really getting into it... Looking back on it, it seems kinda embarrassing."

"No, I don't think so at all! And, um! I—I thought I'd bake you a cake once we're finished here!"

"Whoa, really? Your sweets are seriously delicious, Ravel. I can't wait."

At this remark, Ravel cupped her chin in her hand and answered fearlessly, "Of course! It's a special occasion!"

This was textbook Ravel, 100 percent.

Seemingly from nowhere, an army of fresh visitors descended on the ticket counter.

"Um, can I have one for the ritual purification?"

I needed to focus on the task at hand—selling tickets!

“Hey, Issei. You don’t have a secret underground shop or anything, do you?!”

“What was that I heard about a sexy photo shoot?!”

Before my real work, maybe I’d need to give Matsuda and Motohama a good thrashing...



“So the Sitri group’s Rating Game was Scramble Flags?”

“Yeah. We had to keep running back and forth across the field... Man, I’m exhausted...”

I was having a brief chat with Saji as we strolled around the new school building.

Koneko and I had been taking a look at the various stalls during our lunch break when we’d bumped into Saji patrolling the campus as a member of the student council.

Before long, we found ourselves discussing our respective Rating Games.

Apparently, the Sitri Familia’s match against Seekvaira Agares had revolved around capturing as many flags as possible.

“Sounds like Dice Figures wasn’t exactly easy, either, Hyoudou,” Saji remarked.

“Yeah. We didn’t have to scramble across the battlefield, but the challenge came in working out who to send into battle. Rating Games sure are tough, huh?”

“Damn right... I’ve got a hard road ahead of me if I’m going to become an instructor for them...”

The Sitri Familia’s ambition was to build a school for Rating Games, and Saji’s dream was to become one of its teachers. Nothing worth doing in life was easy, was it?

“And the match?” I asked as we stopped so Saji could buy a hot dog from a nearby stall.

“It was close, but we won. It was all about who could gather the most flags, so it didn’t really matter which team was stronger. Still, toward the end, I turned

into my Dragon King form and laid waste to the whole battlefield... I'm pretty sure I earned myself a pretty bad evaluation for that... Ah, I've caused the chairwoman so much trouble..." Saji fell to the ground, cradling his head in his hands.

He went berserk again? I hadn't been there to stop him this time, so it must have been a nightmare to get him to cool down.

"Haaaah... Maybe transforming into a Dragon King is beyond me when you aren't around, Hyoudou... Hey, you! Don't sit on that flower bed!" Saji took off, chasing and shouting at an errant rule-breaker.

Koneko tugged on my hand. "...Let's try the shooting gallery, Issei."

That did sound like fun.

"All right. How about I buy you something if you can beat me?"

"...Do you mean it? I won't go easy on you."

I ended up losing horribly and had to shower Koneko with all manner of rewards...



The Academy Festival was in its final stage, and students had lit campfires all throughout the schoolyard. A large crowd of boys and girls were participating in a Turkey in the Straw dance nearby.

Somehow, I'd managed to sell every last ticket to our occult mansion. I was completely exhausted, so I decided to collapse in the clubroom. Maybe I was still fatigued from the battle with Sairaorg...

I'd also only just awakened my True Queen ability, which was still rather undeveloped. According to Ddraig, I would have to work hard to properly iron it out. He also told me that mastering my Triaina would help to increase the overall potential of my True Queen as well.

The only thing for it was to work hard to get the hang of my abilities.

Incidentally, both Sirzechs and Leviathan were visiting because of the Academy Festival. No sooner had they popped up than they'd been dragged away by Grayfia and the chairwoman...

I stepped inside the clubroom. We hadn't used it for any events during the Academy Festival, so it looked the same as it always did.

To my surprise, someone else was already present. The prez was sitting in her chair. She must have found time to change, as she'd swapped her waitress outfit for her regular uniform.

"Issei...", she whispered when she saw me enter. "...Good work today."

"Ah. Thanks."

"I'm in my third and final year, which makes this my last Academy Festival. So I wanted to come back here for a few minutes."

"I—I see..."

"..."

"..."

The prez and I fell silent. Following our Rating Game, things had been super awkward between us. The reason was obvious enough—I had blurted out my feelings for her to the whole world.

She still hadn't given me her response, and so whenever we were in each other's company, we both found ourselves filled with unease and trepidation.

Just thinking back on it made me feel so embarrassed! I could hardly believe I'd let myself get carried away and proclaimed my love to the whole world! Apparently, the underworld newspapers were going crazy reporting on it.

One of the headlines had read **BREAST DRAGON AND SWITCH PRINCESS—A ROMANCE THAT TRANSCENDS MASTER AND SERVANT?!**

We wouldn't be able to go back there for a while. I was confident we'd be hounded by paparazzi. We were in a bit of a bind...

"Why don't you tell her how you feel again? Just the two of you this time."

Sairaorg's words of advice echoed in the back of my mind.

...

There was no turning back now. It was time to be brave and muster my courage. After all, there was no denying that I loved her!

But, well...that meant I had to say it. The name I'd so desperately wished to call her all this time. I *would* say it. I would!

I swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and in a hoarse voice, said, "R-Rias..."

"...Huh?"

The prez blinked vacantly for a moment, all but asking me to repeat myself.

All right then, I'll say it again—clearly this time! Here goes!

"I... I want to protect you, Rias...for the rest of my life... I love you, Rias!"

"—."

The prez looked as though she wanted to answer, but the words were stuck. Immediately, there were tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

I felt my face turning pale. *Uh-oh! I made her cry! It can't be! Did I upset her that much...?*

Perhaps seeing my fear, she shook her head and wiped her face. "It's all right, Issei. I—I'm... I'm just so happy..."

She walked toward me and put a hand on my cheek.

"You finally called me by name... I've been waiting so long. So long... I—I wasn't strong enough to say it, to let you know... I thought it was hopeless... But when you said how you felt during the match...I was so overjoyed, I felt like I might lose my mind..."

...

Hearing this, I felt my face contorting in a stupid grin...

"So what you're saying is...?"

Rias nodded in response to my question.



—! S-seriously...?! I—I... I have a chance with her...?

“I love you, too, Issei... More than anyone else...”

The prez’s lips—*Rias’s* lips—drew close to mine...

“Rias...”

“Issei...”

Just as we were about to kiss...

Thud.

...there came an untimely sound from behind the door.

“H-hey, don’t push, Xenovia!” Irina chided.

A quick glance around revealed the face of every last member of the Occult Research Club!

What are they doing?! Aughhhhh! Were they spying on us?! Did they see everything?!

“C-congratulations, Issei! And to you, too, Prez! Now I can make a move of my own without feeling bad about it!” Xenovia declared, her voice stiff.

“U-um, congratulations, both of you! Maybe now I can finally follow after you, Rias!”

Even Asia spied on us?!

“Oh dear. Now I’ll be able to start an affair with Issei for real.”

Akeno as well?!

“...This is where it really gets good.”

What are you suggesting, Koneko?!

“Sorry, I saw it all.”

“I’m touched!”

Kiba?! And Gasper, too?! Give me a break!

“Just for today, I’ll overlook any improper activities, all right?”

This is none of your business, Rossweiße! You're supposed to be a teacher!

“I got permission to use the home economics room, so I’ve baked a cake!” Ravel announced, carrying a huge, delicious-looking dessert. From the look of it, she was the only one who hadn’t been peeping on us. “Huh? Did something happen?” she inquired, tilting her head to one side.

Rias was trembling all over.

“Ahhhhh! I’ve had it with all of you! That was supposed to be one of the most precious and important moments in my whole life! This is all *your* fault, Issei! Why did you have to confess your feelings *here*?!”

“Huh?! I’m to blame?!”

""""""""""You definitely are!"""""""""" the others called out in agreement.

You've got to be kidding me!

And so the curtain fell on our tumultuous Academy Festival and our battle against Sairaorg.

Now then, how far would my confession take me...?

Extra Life

Waking Dreams, Unwaking Dreams

I—Azazel—was paying a visit to the hospital in the Sitri territory while seeing to an errand in the underworld.

There, a young man with a well-toned, burly build was buying flowers in the hospital store. He jumped a bit at the sight of me.

“Governor.”

“Hey there, champ.”

It was Sairaorg.

I wanted to meet with him after delivering my report, and I came here for that reason.

After he’d fought so magnificently during the match, I thought I ought to give him my compliments.

We exchanged a few words as we made our way down the corridor. Eventually, the conversation turned to Issei and the others.

“How is Issei Hyoudou doing?” Sairaorg asked.

I let out a hearty laugh. “Yeah. So apparently, he confessed his feelings to Rias. Ha-ha-ha. Ever since the Academy Festival, those two have been like a pair of innocent newlyweds. I can hardly bring myself to watch. Still, you can bet the other girls won’t stand by in silence, so things might get interesting soon. He’s certainly making good progress on his harem, wouldn’t you say?”

Undoubtedly, Akeno, Asia, and Koneko would start fighting over him in earnest now. The question was how they would go about it now that his relationship with Rias was all but official. I couldn’t see Akeno letting up on her advances, seeing how much she wanted to be his third string. Maybe she would genuinely try to start an affair with him? Plus, Xenovia and Irina were gunning

after his child. Would they set an ambush of their own?

Just how would our Breast Dragon Emperor, unschooled in the ways of the world, react to these advances? I was eager to see how things developed!

“I see. That’s good to hear. He’s the most appropriate match for Rias, if you ask me.”

From where I was standing, Sairaorg wasn’t really in a position to spend his time worrying about others.

“So back to square one?” I questioned.

Sairaorg nodded.

After his defeat, those backing the House of Bael had all abandoned him.

He’d essentially lost his connections to the upper echelons of demon society in a single stroke. Such was the nature of Rating Games. Demons, ever mindful of the practical value of things, never hesitated to discard someone as soon as their utility diminished.

That was simply a basic truth of life in the underworld.

“Yes. It won’t be a problem. I’m used to it.”

“Our resident idiot is worried about you, though.”

Issei was truly concerned. Evidently, Sairaorg had earned his respect.

“Could you give him a message for me? Tell him it won’t be long before I catch up.”

That was a good smile. Sairaorg might have lost, but it was nice to see his genuineness hadn’t taken a hit. Something told me it wouldn’t be too long before he and Issei had a rematch. I could hardly wait.

At that moment, a figure—a butler, perhaps—appeared before us, his breathing ragged.

“Master Sairaorg...”

The servant’s face was stained with tears of joy.

“What is it?”

His voice trembled, yet the butler did his best to answer. "It's Lady Misra..."

A large group of doctors and nurses had crowded into the hospital room, every one of them wearing expressions of astonishment and disbelief.

"It's a miracle."

"Impossible..."

I took a peek inside and saw that the woman on the bed had awoken from her long slumber. She stared out the window, peering at the distant scenery.

A shaking Sairaorg let the flowers he'd bought fall silently to the floor.

The woman—his mother—faced her visitor.

"Mother, it's Sairaorg. Do you recognize me?"

"Yes, of course I do..."

Misra raised an unsteady hand to her son's cheek, and he took it in his own.

"My dear Sairaorg... I feel like I've been watching over you in a dream for so very long..." She smiled gently. "What a fine young man you've become..."

"..."

A solitary tear spilled down Sairaorg's cheek.

"I still have a long way to go, Mother... Once you're feeling better, let's go home. To *our* home..."

I had no business intruding on this reunion any longer, so I quietly slipped away.

"What a fine young man you've become."

Hey, Sairaorg?

This is why you've pushed yourself so hard, why you've been fighting all this time, isn't it? You wanted to hear your mom say that, didn't you?

Had I asked him as much, I doubt he would've been able to answer.

Still...

I'm certain she couldn't be prouder of you.

You're a heck of a guy, Issei. Who could've imagined you'd pull off a miracle?

This is your doing, right? It's got to be. You came here not too long ago and used your Boob-Lingual ability. And while I can't quite pinpoint the exact effect it had on her, it certainly roused her from the depths of that endless sleep.

I mean, I can't think of any other possible explanation for this phenomenon.

The Breast Dragon and his many marvels.

Hey, Issei. Do you even realize how many people your generous, loving idiocy has saved?

Just how far will your ridiculousness reach...? I'm dying to find out.

I stared out the window at the underworld sky—an unchanging purple vista.

“Who's the real hero? A descendant of an ancient warrior or the shining demon champion?”

AFTERWORD

Stay tuned for an anime adaptation! That's right, everyone, your continued support has made it a reality! Thank you all so much! For more details, keep an eye out for the latest issue of *Dragon Magazine* or check out the official website!

I'll be involved with various aspects of the anime production. It will be my first time working on a project like this, so there's still a lot to learn, but I'm sure it will be worth all the effort.

Do you know what this means?! You're going to be able to see the prez's breasts on your very own TV screens, you lucky jerks!

Now then, in this tenth volume, Issei and Rias have finally started addressing each other on a first-name basis! It's been three years since this series began, and our star has finally grown up!

Our main hero and heroine have finally realized their feelings for one another.

Still, this isn't the end for Issei's long-sought harem, nor for the maidens chasing after him. Heck, I'm not exaggerating when I say that this is just the beginning! Asia is already of the utmost importance to Issei, and Akeno is gearing up to be the prime candidate for an illicit love affair. I'm hoping to give all our heroines a happy ending, so please keep sending all of them your support.

The strongest members of Rias's Familia, Kiba, Xenovia, and Rossweisse, keep on losing battles. That doesn't mean they're weak, though. They're just continually put up against impossibly powerful opponents. Akeno and Rias are formidable fighters as well, but they've also had a string of bad luck.

Issei's True Queen is still in an incomplete state. Something tells me he'll keep on getting stronger as he learns how to master it and his Triaina ability.

Let's talk about Sairaorg for a moment. I wrote him to be a formidable opponent for the Gremory Familia to overcome. As it turned out, even when Kiba, Xenovia, Rossweisse, and Issei combined their efforts, they only barely managed to defeat him.

He possesses a Longinus, the Regulus Nemea, with its own sense of free will. This is embodied in the Nemean Lion. It can transform both into a beast and a powerful battle-ax, and it has a variant-type Balance Breaker. Sairaorg prefers to fight with his fists, so he doesn't use the battle-ax form very often... Also—and I wasn't able to touch on this in the story itself—Sairaorg's last remaining Pawn piece is a mutation piece.

On to the Rating Game. This time, there were some special rules involved. I actually devised some special rule sets a few years back, but I thought it best to introduce the competition using the standard regulations first. I've only been able to start showing the alternate variations in this book. There are a few other rule sets, like Scramble Flags, but we'll take a look at them in more detail when the opportunity arises. Dice Figures is relatively straightforward and easy to understand, proceeding round by round. I wanted to give each character an opportunity to really emphasize their skills and make them come alive.

We've also met the ranking number one, Emperor Belial. Rias's ultimate goal is to dethrone him. For the time being, he's simply part of the broader setting. Seeing as our demon youths have been garnering so much attention, I thought it would be sensible to at least mention the heavy hitters in the professional Rating Game world. For the time being, I haven't envisioned a match between Rias's Familia and the Rating Game champion.

Now for some words of thanks. My appreciation goes out to Miyama-Zero and my editor H for all their help! Thank you so much for everything, especially all your assistance with helping the anime adaptation get off the ground.

The first volume of the manga is now in bookstores as well! I've also been working with the illustrator, Hiroji Mishima, on ideas for the anime. Do take a look at the manga adaptation, if you haven't already! There's also a new spin-off manga series starting in *Monthly Dragon Age* magazine! It's a heartwarming story featuring Asia and Koneko as the main characters! Hiroichi's illustrations are simply adorable! It's a must-read!

This last volume was a relatively straightforward story about the inner workings of demon society. It's also an important chapter for our main heroine, Rias. The next one will be all about our heroes' promotion trials, but it won't be the end for the Gremory Familia. And Koneko's relationship with Ravel is more cat-and-bird than cat-and-dog, but she'll be taking center stage next time, too. Keep your eyes peeled!

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