

High school DXD

SUPPLEMENTARY
LESSON HEROES

ICHIEI
ISHIBUMI


ILLUSTRATION BY
Miyama-Zero

12

PARENTAL ADVISORY
WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT



High school
DxD
12
SUPPLEMENTARY
LESSON HEROES



She was back.
The president
was talking
like her usual
self again.
*Ah, Issei, she's
back!*

Now we could
fight. We
could take on
anyone and
everyone!

"My adorable
servants! Let's
work together as a
Familia—to send
our enemy packing!"



SUPPLEMENTARY LESSON HEROES

12

ICHIEI ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY
MIYAMA-ZERO


New York

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Volume 12

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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Life.-3: A Gremory with No Red Dragon Emperor](#)

[Life.-2: Buddies](#)

[Dimensional Void](#)

[Satan](#)

[Life.-1: The Young Demon Alliance!](#)

[Life.0: The Bust Dragon Emperor](#)

[Life.1: A Crimson Promise](#)

[Azazel](#)

[Hero...?](#)

[New Life](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

It'll be okay! There's no need to cry!

The Breast Dragon will come and save all of us!

Life.-3

A Gremory with No Red Dragon Emperor

The time was around noon, two days after the middle-class demon promotion exam.

I—Yuuto Kiba—stood in a corner of a huge room in the Gremory estate. The entire building was in an uproar. Servants and private soldiers were rushing around everywhere.

Why? Because the underworld was presently in the midst of a crisis.

Swarms of gargantuan anti-monsters summoned by Shalba Beelzebub's old Demon King regime with the help of the Annihilation Maker were currently marching on every major city and key location in the underworld. The oversized television screens in the room all showed broadcasts on the urgent news.

"Take a look at this! These massive monsters appeared out of nowhere, and they're now heading straight for the city!"

Reporters aboard magic-powered airships and helicopters commented on the disaster in abject horror. The Annihilation Maker had summoned thirteen gargantuan anti-monsters in various locations around the underworld. Each had to be close to a hundred and fifty meters long.

Every one was clearly visible on one of the television screens or another. You could practically get the latest updates on each simply by flicking between channels. Back when we saw them in the artificial dimension, they had resembled a horde of humanoid creatures surrounded by thick black auras.

Perhaps they had changed upon entering the underworld. In any case, some of them were still bipedal, but others were hauling themselves toward their targets on all fours. Not a single one resembled any of its kin.

Even those that walked on two legs were hideous composite creations. One

had a head like some kind of aquatic animal, another only one eye, and yet another four arms. They were chimeras. And the quadrupedal monsters were just as bizarre, made up of parts from various beasts.

They advanced slowly, one step at a time, but their march had no end. At this rate, those making for the most vital cities would undoubtedly reach their targets before the day was out. The others would get to theirs tomorrow.

But by far the biggest problem was that those behemoths produced smaller monsters entirely by themselves. Every now and then, parts of their bodies swelled and surged, swarms of offspring tearing through their flesh. Those lesser monsters were roughly human-size, but they were so many in number. They seemed to pour out dozens or even hundreds at a time, destroying forests, sweeping mountains bare, and devouring every last living thing they encountered.

So far, the inhabitants of the towns and villages in their wake had been evacuated, keeping casualties minimal. But the settlements themselves had been overrun.

It was a horrific situation. Absolutely nothing was left after those creatures passed through.

They were too much. To think that this was what that top-tier Longinus, the Annihilation Maker, was capable of... As one who possessed a creation-type Sacred Gear myself, I was left in awe. The power to destroy an entire world, something that ought to be limited to a literal god, was on full display.

Among those abominations, the largest by far was making its way to Lilith, the capital city in the Demon Kings' territory. Its huge humanoid body was an order greater than the others. Even through a television screen, there was no mistaking its gargantuan size.

The underworld authorities had dubbed it the Jabberwocky, and the remaining twelve were Bandersnatches. Apparently, Azazel had taken the names from the works of the author Lewis Carroll.

Warriors of the underworld launched an attack to intercept the various Bandersnatches live onscreen. They unleashed barrages of demonic fire in a mass synchronized attack with their black wings spread wide.

The resulting explosions were enough to completely engulf the areas surrounding the gargantuan anti-monsters.

These assault teams were composed of various ultimate-class demons and their Familias. Any ordinary monster would have been destroyed instantly by such bombardments.

And yet...

"I'll be damned! That last attack from a team of ultimate-class demons was completely ineffective!" exclaimed a terrified reporter.

Yes, up on the television screens, the gargantuan anti-monsters seemed completely unfazed by the tremendous attacks.

It was no different from back when we first saw them in the artificial dimension.

Any damage we did was merely surface level. We hadn't been able to inflict anything critical.

Each squad dispatched to intercept a Bandersnatch was a top-ranked team in the Rating Game, yet even they couldn't mount a successful assault. Now they all had their hands full dealing with the smaller creatures spawning from the lumbering giants... Just how hardy were those things?

The demon forces fighting the anti-monsters received support from our allied forces—squads of fallen angels, Brave Saints dispatched from Heaven, corps of Valkyrie battle maidens from Valhalla, and a large contingent of troops from the Greek gods. Thanks to their aid, we'd managed to avoid the worst thus far.

But our problems were piling up.

The first was the Jabberwocky, which outstripped the others in strength.

Last night, Diehauser Belial, the champion of the Rating Game, had launched an offensive against it. Although his group succeeded in damaging the creature, that only served to delay it. The Jabberwocky quickly regenerated, resuming its march toward its target completely unperturbed.

News of this shocking development had spread like wildfire throughout the underworld, causing mass panic. Everyone had been certain that the champion

and his Familia would dispatch the threat.

Emperor Belial's strength, and that of his Familia, was beyond question. Even we members of the Gremory Familia wouldn't have stood a chance against them at our best. That was how good they were. And they had failed.

The next complication was the old Demon King regime. Its forces had been lying low for a while, but they pounced upon this opportunity, usurping control everywhere they could. Undoubtedly, they'd timed their incursions to coincide with the gigantic anti-monsters' assault.

Naturally, fighters from the underworld had been sent to deal with them, too. In short, the underworld had descended into an out-of-control war.

Reports came in about high-class demon Familias rebelling against their masters, too. It wasn't particularly hard to imagine that humans equipped with Sacred Gears, reincarnated as demons against their will, sought to seize this chance to exact revenge.

To put it as Azazel might, it was like a massive bargain-bin sale of Sacred Gears. Fighters had been sent to respond to those threats as well... But to be honest, I didn't think the underworld could pull any more of its forces away from the more significant threat. After all, our priority had to be defeating the massive anti-monsters. If the underworld's key strongholds and cities were rendered inoperable, there would be nothing to stop other hostile forces from launching their own invasions.

The underworld was facing a grave crisis.

Those anti-monsters were the direct result of a coup attempt by the old Demon King regime... It seemed that Hades, the god of the underworld, had instigated it all from behind the scenes.

To make matters worse, we had no idea what the Khaos Brigade's Hero Faction was plotting next.

Back in the artificial dimension, they were just as surprised by Hades and the old Demon King regime as we were. Still, we couldn't expect those descendants of legendary heroes to remain idle forever.

They were terrorists, after all. And when they took action, it definitely

wouldn't be good.

That was precisely why the all-powerful gods, buddhas, and Demon Kings couldn't engage the anti-monsters directly. There was no telling whether Cao Cao and his friends were waiting to take advantage of such an opportunity. After all, that Holy Spear of his could easily destroy just about anyone.

If even one god, buddha, or Demon King perished, the balance of power between the various factions would shift in unpredictable ways. Every one of them played a vital role in their own realms.

Plus, Hades might dispatch hordes of grim reapers at any moment...

Fortunately, civilian evacuation from the underworld had been a top priority, and serious losses had been skirted thus far.

If demonkind suffered major casualties, its survival as a species would fall into jeopardy. So naturally, there was no way that Sirzechs would put the people's safety on the line.

But at this rate, the underworld would...

Just how deep did Shalba Beelzebub's grudge against the current demon government go?

"Apparently, the Demon Kings' Familias will soon be sent out against the Jabberwocky and the Bandersnatches."

I turned at the remark and spotted Riser Phenex.

I'd been watching the scenes unfolding on the television screens so intently that I hadn't noticed he had arrived.

Riser let out a deep sigh. "I'm here chaperoning my brother, so I thought I'd check in on Rias and Ravel. I mean, this is a pretty wild situation... I'm sorry, Yuuto Kiba," he said, brow furrowed.

Had word of Issei's death already spread?

Yes, we had lost an important friend during our last fight—the Red Dragon Emperor, Issei Hyoudou. He'd gone in alone to rescue Ophis, who'd been kidnapped by Shalba Beelzebub. We tried to summon him back to our world by opening the Dragon Gate, but...

...all we got back were his eight Evil Pieces, his chess pawns.

We were also able to detect a small amount of Samael's aura, leaving us no option but to conclude that the former fallen angel had cursed Issei. That was why he hadn't been able to return to us...

There was no knowing how exactly Issei had been affected by the curse, but Samael's aura was unmistakable. Maybe Shalba had struck a deal with Hades for Samael's power.

Issei's demonic abilities had never been good, and Azazel had made it perfectly clear that he wouldn't be able to defend himself against that monster.

There were previous cases of a summoning only calling back Evil Pieces, and the bearer was dead in each one.

It seemed to happen for Familia members with a burning desire to return to their masters... Afterward, the Evil Pieces ceased functioning, unable to be used again.

We tried asking the authorities in Heaven to look into what happened to the Red Dragon Emperor's soul. After all, the Red Dragon Emperor automatically sought out its next vessel whenever its host died. That kind of information was supposed to be registered in the Sacred Gear database system up in Heaven...

However, the situation with the current generation of Longinuses was more complicated than usual, and no such data had yet been recorded.

The Grigori Research Institute was likewise conducting its own investigation... but its members had informed us that they were unlikely to turn up any detailed information.

To top it off, Ophis's whereabouts were still unknown, even though Issei had gone to save her. Was she still out there somewhere in the dimensional void? Or had she also succumbed to Samael's curse? People were still trying to solve that mystery, but at the very least, it seemed unlikely that Shalba had given her to Hades.

Why? Because there was absolutely no way that Issei didn't finish him off.

Knowing Issei, he took down Shalba. Even if it meant risking his own life to get

it done. All of us, myself included, believed that absolutely.

Yet no matter how desperately we looked, we couldn't unearth any leads that might point to anything other than Issei's demise.

His death hadn't been officially reported yet, and only select individuals were supposed to be aware.

Still...! We couldn't just accept this lying down...!

Somehow, I managed to keep my cool while responding to Riser. "Thank you for your sympathy... Were you able to speak with the president?"

Riser shook his head. "No. She wouldn't open her door. She wouldn't even answer when I called out to her... I guess she's not exactly in the right headspace to talk, considering what became of the man she loves..."

A clatter rang out as someone placed a cup of tea on the table set up nearby. It was Koneko.

"Tea...", she announced, her expression the same as always as she sat on a chair in the corner..

"Listen, Ravel. You've gotta lift your spirits, you know?"

Two more figures soon appeared—Ravel and a man I hadn't met before.

I recognized him from somewhere. TV, I think.

He was the eldest son of the House of Phenex, the future head of the family—Ruval Phenex. He had a neat and gentle face and wore formal aristocratic garb unlike his delinquent younger brother. His demeanor was mild, and he seemed to glow with splendor just standing there.

Ruval was one of the top-ten fighters in the Rating Game. There were rumors that he might even be promoted to ultimate-class status before long.

So Riser Phenex is here accompanying his brother.

After trying to cheer up his sister, Ruval turned to me. "You must be Rias's Knight. I'm sure you're well aware of the situation. I trust I can leave these with you." He offered me several vials of Phoenix Tears from his pocket. "I came to deliver these for you all and to check in on my sister and Rias. Circumstances

being what they are, most of our stock of tears has been distributed among the attack squads. I'm afraid this was all I could put together. You're a promising group, and I'm sorry for your loss. I'll be taking my dunce brother with me as we launch another counterattack."

Apparently, the Phenex brothers were being sent to fight the anti-monsters. A pair of immortal phoenixes would certainly be of great help on the front lines.

"...Sorry for being such a dunce," Riser groused.

The Phenex family had four children, an unusually high number for modern-day high-class demons. The eldest son and the third son were Rating Game stars, while the second son was supposedly a media-company executive.

I took the tears from Ruval... No doubt this meant that we would be heading to the front lines soon.

Ruval flashed his brother a smile, then gave him a playful chop to the back of the head. "Rias and her Queen are brokenhearted on account of the Red Dragon Emperor's death. I expect you're trying to keep yourself calm for the group. You're a devoted member of your Familia, struggling with his passing in your own way... You're doing great."

"Thank you."

In truth, I could barely bring myself to keep on going. But I had to. Because just like Ruval said, Akeno and the president were far from being at the top of their game.

The president had locked herself in her room in the mansion along with Issei's Evil Pieces. Akeno had sunken into a deep depression and sat on a sofa in her guest room with a vacant look. Neither had shown any reaction when I tried calling out to them.

They'd depended on Issei. I could only imagine what they were going through.

As for Asia...she was holed up in her own room, crying without end.

"I should go to his side... But if I did... I'm sure he'd be angry at me... But we promised...to always be together... So if I go, if I join him, we could be together again... Issei... What am I supposed to do?"

She, too, was desperately fighting her grief.

Xenovia and Irina were away in Heaven. I had no way of knowing whether word of Issei's death had reached them yet.

Normally, Xenovia, who knew the biblical God was dead, wouldn't be allowed to enter Heaven, as her presence might affect the system governing the realm. However, with the help of Azazel and the Norse World Tree Yggdrasil, she could remain there for short lengths of time.

Yes, even with help from various other factions, the system of Heaven was a delicate thing.

Neither Rossweisse nor Gasper had reached out since leaving on their own missions to become stronger. They still hadn't been informed of Issei's passing.

The Gremory Familia was in shambles. Not too long ago, we were the most promising team around. Now we were less than a shadow of that.

Even if all the other members returned, I doubted that we'd be able to fight like we had before.

Issei was the heart of our Familia. His absence was too great a loss...

Can I support everyone? Issei, lend me some of your courage. The courage to face the others...

"My family would have loved for Ravel to join the Red Dragon Emperor's Familia," Ruval said. "It would have been marvelous."

"I know."

Issei might not have noticed it, but the Phenex family's intentions were clear enough to the rest of us.

"We will need to rethink Ravel's future now, but may we leave her with you for the time being? She seems to have made friends here. Koneko and Gasper, I think their names were? She told me about them during our talks via magic circle. She certainly seemed to be having a lot of fun."

I guess Ravel had let her family know how well things were going at Kuou Academy.

“Of course,” I replied. “We’ll take care of her.”

Ruval broke into a smile. “Very good. We’ll be going, then, Riser. It’s time you show the entire underworld those burning phoenix wings of yours. You don’t want people to keep mocking you as an upstart, after all.”

“Got it. See ya, Yuuto Kiba. Look after Rias and the others for me.”

With those parting words, Ruval and Riser took their exit.

The room went silent.

Ravel sat down beside Koneko. Tears welled up in her eyes the moment she did, and she buried her face in her hands.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this... I finally found a gentleman I respect and admire, and now...”

Ravel had loved and treasured Issei dearly. She had a bit of a standoffish personality, but now and then, you could see her looking up to him like a hero.

Undoubtedly, she’d hoped to join his Familia when it came time for him to start his own.

“I thought I was ready for this...,” Koneko mumbled. “No matter how strong Issei and Yuuto are, even they have their limits...”

Koneko. Did you really believe this might happen? Did you steel your heart in expectation? I suppose doing so was only natural, considering how many times we were pushed to the brink of death.

In fact, Issei and I had spoken about what would happen should either of us die.



Hearing Koneko talking to herself, Ravel jumped up to her feet in a rage, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You’re putting him behind you too fast...! I’m not as strong as you, Koneko...!”

Koneko accepted this fit of passion head-on, her usual stony expression slowly crumbling until she was bawling as well. “I... I... I’m at my limit, too...! I finally told him how I feel, and then he...he...he went and died! You idiot, Issei! You stupid, stupid idiot!”

Koneko shoved her face in her sleeves. She must have used all her strength to try to remain composed. Even while serving tea, she’d kept her true emotions buried underneath.

But now they were flowing from her petite body all at once.

Ravel wrapped an arm around her friend. “Koneko... I’m sorry.”

“Ugh... Ravel. It’s too painful...”

Issei’s death was too much to bear for the two first-year girls.

But I had to endure. Breaking down now wouldn’t change anything. Now wasn’t the time.

“Yuuto Kiba?” called a new voice.

When I spun around, I came face-to-face with a fallen angel, Baraqiel.

“I see. So Akeno...”

As we made our way down the corridor, I explained the situation to Baraqiel.

We were bound for the guest room Akeno was holed up in. Baraqiel was Akeno’s father, and he wore a somber expression. He must have heard about Issei’s death and Akeno’s reaction. Clearly, he’d taken both to heart.

Before leaving them, I’d asked Koneko and Ravel to look after Asia. To be fair, neither of them was in the right frame of mind to help her, but I felt it would be better if other women who’d adored Issei comforted Asia.

I wasn’t up to the task. I couldn’t replace Issei. I was pathetic. My job as a Knight was to protect my fellow Familia members, yet I couldn’t even help a single one of them...

At the very least, I would defend them with my swords. That was the best I could hope to offer.

Finally, we arrived at Akeno's room, and I knocked on the door. There was no response.

Baraqiel and I opened the door and stepped inside. The room was dark, unlit. We found Akeno right where I'd last seen her, still sitting on the sofa with a vacant look.

Baraqiel approached his daughter and gave her shoulders a slight shake. "Akeno..."

Perhaps responding to her father's voice, she spoke up for the first time in what felt like ages. "F-Father...?" she murmured, staring up at him.

Baraqiel nodded silently, embracing Akeno. "I heard what happened."

At this, Akeno's emotions returned to her, and she pressed her face into her father's chest. "F-Father... I—I...", came her tearful voice.

Baraqiel patted her gently on the head. "It's okay to weep. I'm here for you. Cry all you need to. But remember, you're the Gremory Familia's Queen, foremost among young demons. You need to use your abilities for the good of the underworld."

"Ugh, Issei... Why...?" Akeno bawled into her father's chest.

With Baraqiel here, maybe Akeno would be able to pull herself back from the brink.

Sensing that I would only be a distraction if I stuck around any longer, I quietly made my exit.

-○●○-

On my way back to the main floor, I saw a familiar figure coming down the hallway.

"...Saji."

Yes, it was Saji.

He raised a hand in response. "Yo, Kiba."

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Saji breathed a sigh. “Well, the chairwoman wanted to check in on Rias. I’m her chaperone. We bumped into the Phenex brothers out front.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you.”

So Sona was here to see how Rias was doing.

We continued down the corridor side by side. Saji fixed me with a determined look. “I’m taking part in this one, too, Kiba. To protect the civilians in the city.”

Evidently, the Sitri Familia was rising to the occasion in the underworld’s time of crisis. Promising youths were being called up one after the next. No doubt the Bael and Agares Familias would be next.

It wasn’t surprising at all that the Sitri Familia had been called to action. If not for what happened to Issei, we’d probably be out there fighting, too.

“We should be joining you later,” I said.

But Saji cast me a worried look. “Are you all still able to fight?”

Given how the president and the others were faring, it was only natural that Saji had doubts. I understood the situation well enough to know that there was no way we’d be able to give it our best.

Still, we’d have to go.

“We have to. Every powerful demon alive is being called on right now. That includes us... So we have to do it,” I replied, emphasizing my sense of responsibility.

Saji fixed me with a smile. “Right.” He nodded.

His lips were curled in a grin, but there was something scary about his expression.

“Do you know who killed Hyoudou?” he asked, his gaze fierce.

“I do. But he’s gone now... Issei must have defeated him before the end.”

Issei definitely finished off Shalba Beelzebub. He would have finished the fight, even if poisoned by Samael. There was no doubt in my mind about that.

Saji's eyes relaxed for a moment. "So he went down fighting. No, there's no way he'd lose. He died after winning, yeah? I mean, there's no way he could lose, right?!"

Saji was struggling with this just as much as we were. Tears ran down his face.

"The guy who got him is dead," he continued, ferocity burning in his gaze. "Then I'll just have to take my anger out on the Khaos Brigade. They're the ones responsible, right?"

"Saji, you don't—"

"He was always ahead of me, you know? I was going to catch up. That's why I pushed myself so hard in the fight against the Agares Familia...! I was only able to pull through all that grueling training because *he* was there, a Pawn, just like me!"

All this time, Saji had been following in Issei's wake. Having become demons around the same time, Issei must have been a huge inspiration for Saji.

"I'll never forgive those bastards, robbing me of my goals! Robbing me of my friend!" Saji spat hatefully. "I'll burn them all to the ground with Vritra's cursed flames! Not even my death will extinguish the black fire! I'll end their miserable existence, even if it costs me my life!"

Saji's ferocious aura was almost overflowing. He was probably fighting to contain his explosive rage, biding his time until he could let it loose.

"We would all be in trouble if you died, Saji."

Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted Chairwoman Sona coming our way.

"Chairwoman."

"Saji. I can understand how you feel, but it won't do for you to die as well... If we're going to do this, let's burn them to the ground *and* come back alive."

Saji wiped his tears with his sleeve, then gave Chairwoman Sona a firm nod. "Okay!"

Chairwoman Sona turned her attention to me. "It's time for us to go. Serafall Leviathan has asked us to help defend Lilith. We're to protect the city and evacuate civilians."

With so many ultimate-class demons away intercepting the massive anti-monsters, those in charge had enlisted as many promising demon youths as possible to help with the protection and evacuation efforts. We'd need to join before much longer as well.

"Did you see the president?" I asked.

Sona nodded quietly. "She's holed up in her room. She didn't say much when I tried talking to her."

Not even her best friend could get through to her...

"Times like this call for a certain someone. I've already asked for them to come."

"A certain someone?" I repeated, confused.

Without answering my question, Sona merely flashed me a weak smile.

Who was she referring to?

When I returned to the main floor, the television screens showed the situation in the capital. The evacuation was still underway. Great crowds of people were being led to safety by underworld soldiers.

All of a sudden, various children who called the capital home appeared on the screens. A female reporter started asking them questions.

"Me? Afraid?" one of the children answered with a huge smile. "As if! I mean, the Breast Dragon is gonna come back and smash that monster to a pulp!" He had a Breast Dragon action figure in his hand.

Other children pushed forward from the edge of the frame.

"That's right! The Breast Dragon will save us!"

"Breasts! Breasts!"

The kids didn't seem worried in the slightest. They firmly believed that the Breast Dragon would rush in to save the day.

"Come quickly, Breast Dragon!"

Seeing the children in such high spirits, I—I... I clamped my mouth shut, fighting desperately to hold back the surge of emotion rising up inside me.

Are you watching, Issei?

Those kids... They all believe in you... They don't look worried, do they? Because they really do believe you'll swoop in to save them...

So you know...you have to come back...! You have to be here...! Why aren't you...? You're their hero...! Come on, Issei! You can't betray these kids...!

"The children of the underworld are stronger than we think."

I gasped at the sudden comment. Someone had appeared beside me.

"What are you doing here?!"

"Issei Hyoudou has given those children something precious... Long time no see, Yuuto Kiba. I'm here to check on Rias."

It was Sairaorg Bael.

He was the one Chairwoman Sona had called. I led him to the president's room.

"I'm coming in, Rias," Sairaorg Bael called.

Inside...we found the president sitting curled up on the bed. She looked even more despondent than Akeno, her eyes red and swollen... She'd clearly been crying all this time.

Sairaorg Bael let out a disappointed sigh as he stood beside her. "You look pathetic, Rias."

Rias's expression turned dour. "Sairaorg," she whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"Sona Sitri called me. Don't worry; she used a private line. No one in the great prince faction knows what happened to him."

If the politicians from the House of Bael's great prince faction caught wind of Issei's death, there was no telling what means they might use to attack the Demon King administration after all this chaos. Issei had already become a major presence in the underworld's political sphere.

Sairaorg Bael was apparently well aware of that.

It was only a matter of time before everyone learned the truth, but I still

appreciated his discretion.

“Let’s go,” he declared to the president. “The underworld faces a crisis. How are you going to live with yourself if you, with your powerful Familia, fail to stand and fight? You and I, we’re the most promising members of our generation. We have to set an example for those who follow. Besides, this is a rare opportunity to live up to the expectations of those watching over us and to repay the Demon Kings for their favor.”

These were all reasonable points. Were the president her usual self, she undoubtedly would’ve risen to the challenge.

However, all she did was avert her gaze.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“So you’re going to give up just because no one knows where the man you love has disappeared to? I thought better of you.”

Incensed, the president threw a pillow at Sairaorg Bael’s face. “I—I don’t care for a world without Issei! H-he... He was more important to me than anyone else. For me to keep on living without him...”

Rias fought to contain herself as tears poured down her cheeks.

“That man... The Red Dragon Emperor, Issei Hyoudou... He didn’t fall in love with the woman I’m looking at right now!” Sairaorg Bael bellowed. “He was a stalwart warrior who stood with courage to achieve his dreams and live up to your expectations! Am I wrong?! How can you, his master, the woman he loved so dearly, make a mockery of all he was by stooping so low?!”

The president shivered at this outburst, but Sairaorg Bael wasn’t finished.

“On your feet, Rias. That man always pulled himself back up. He never stopped pushing forward. He beat *me* head-on, Rias! You know that better than anyone!”

Was this one of those things only a rival could understand? Sairaorg Bael must have sensed something during their Rating Game duel. He’d recognized something vital about the way Issei lived.

“Besides, do you *really* think he’s dead?”

Both the president and I were left speechless by the question.

“Think about it,” Sairaorg Bael said with a wry chuckle. “There’s no way he’s kicked the bucket. Let me ask you this: Did he ever sleep with you?”

“...No,” the president answered.

“Bah! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Sairaorg laughed. Eyes burning with vitality, he said, “Then he’s not dead. Issei Hyoudou wouldn’t accept death while he still has you and all those other women who love him waiting. He wanted to know you, body and soul, most of all. Do you honestly believe he’d let death get in his way?”

Sairaorg had nothing in the way of proof, but those words couldn’t have been more persuasive.

“He’s the Breast Dragon, right?” With that, Sairaorg Bael turned to leave. “I’ll be waiting for you on the battlefield. Join me, Rias. With your Familia! If you fail to defend the children of the underworld, how will you be able to call yourselves friends of the Breast Emperor?”

Having said all he wished, Sairaorg made his exit.

He’d arrived out of nowhere and disappeared just as quickly.

So this was what Chairwoman Sona had meant by reaching out to a certain someone.

Sairaorg was right. We had to give greater weight to the possibility that Issei was still alive. Even if his Evil Pieces were all that remained, we needed to believe in his coming resurrection!

Why had I—why had *we*—failed to realize that?

The light had returned to the president’s eyes thanks to this impromptu visit.

Hope had been rekindled in my heart, too.

Sairaorg Bael, a man who fought with naught but his fists. Perhaps this was the kind of feeling only he could have conveyed.

And now that emotion had come alive within each of us, too.

-○○●○-

When I heard that *he* arrived at the manor, I immediately went to see him. I

knew why he was here. It had to be because he wanted help lifting the curse placed on him.

Team Vali waited in a secluded section of the basement.

Vali had been faring poorly after the battle in the artificial dimension, and so the Gremory household had decided to hide him on the advice of Sirzechs and Azazel. Of course, harboring terrorists was no laughing matter.

Still, Vali and his companions had aided us, so Duke Gremory offered them temporary sanctuary.

They were wanted fugitives on the run after being accused of betraying the Hero Faction. They would've had a hard time lying low in the present situation, so the duke's offer must have seemed like a miracle.

When I entered the room where Vali rested, I spotted the remainder of his team...and a small, wrinkled old man with futuristic sunglasses. A tobacco pipe was held between his lips.

It was the original Sun Wukong.

Yes, this was the person I'd come here to meet. I wanted to ask him something that had been bothering me for a while.

The old Sun Wukong was holding his hands over Vali's body, applying his sage arts to soothe his *qi*. Vali sat upright, the upper half of his body exposed.

Sun Wukong moved his hands, aglow with luminous fighting spirit, from Vali's abdomen to his chest, his chest to his neck, his neck to his mouth.

"Gah..."

With that, Vali coughed up a black lump.

The old Sun Wukong placed the mass in a transparent container, sealing it away and affixing what looked like some sort of magic seal to it. That was surely the poison Samael had left coursing through Vali's body.

The old monkey's lips puckered into a smile. "With my sage arts, I've drawn out what remained of the poison. Now your body will be at ease. When that dim-witted grandson of mine reached out to me, I never would have guessed he wanted me to play doctor for an almighty white dragon."

Bikou scowled from his chair beside the bed. It sounded like he was the one who'd called Sun Wukong. I'd heard that he couldn't stand his venerable ancestor, so he must have truly thought this was the only way to save his friend's life.

"Shut up, Gramps... So Vali's better now?"

"Well, he *does* possess extraordinary reserves of demonic energy. All I did was give the healing process a kick start."

In other words, Vali was on the road to recovery.

"Thank you, Master Wukong. Looks like I can fight now," Vali said. For the White Dragon Emperor to show this level of deference could only mean that Sun Wukong was the real deal as far as he was concerned...

"Running off to fight the second your curse is lifted?" Wukong exclaimed, smacking Bikou over the head. "You hopeless battle fanatics... Well, I'd better be going. At least I got to see my idiot grandson for a bit."

"You're leaving, Gramps?" Bikou asked.

"I'm Sakra's spearhead." Wukong puffed on his pipe. "Got some little errands to see to down here in the underworld... Terrorists to exterminate. Never mind I'm an old, old man. That Sakra is a hard master to please, I'll tell you that."

Sun Wukong was going to lend us a hand? That was certainly reassuring, but there was something else bothering me.

It was Vali who gave voice to my question: "Sakra has some kind of connection to Cao Cao, doesn't he? Cao Cao got in the way of Sakra's talks with the *youkai* of Kyoto. What's your boss's stance on all this now?"

I'd heard from Azazel that the Lord of the Devas had some kind of relationship with Cao Cao. However, the incident in Kyoto seemed to fly in the face of that. The more I dwelled on the question, the less it seemed to make sense.

"No idea," Sun Wukong said with a wry grin. "I'm naught but his vanguard, a freedom-loving geezer. I don't have any interest in what that old baldy god of war is playing at behind the curtain."

I could sense the truth to those words. At the very least, Sun Wukong bore no

malicious intent.

Like Bikou, he was mischievous at heart, but he meant us no harm... Unless he was using some kind of extraordinary sage-arts technique to conceal a darker purpose...

Sun Wukong rested a hand under his chin. “But I don’t think Sakra’s gonna start rampaging, okay? I can’t say for sure what’s gonna happen, but I think he’s content to observe from the sidelines. Boy, that Hades went way too far this time.”

Hades.

Yep, there was no mistaking that he was behind all of this... Honestly, if Sakra got involved, it would only worsen the present crisis. After all, he was a god of war said to be a match for all four Demon Kings together.

With the conversation between Vali and Sun Wukong seemingly finished, I decided to speak up. “Master Wukong, may I ask you a question?”

“Oh, the Holy Demon Sword boy? What can this old geezer do for you?”

“Now that you’ve seen Samael’s curse for yourself... I was wondering if you knew under what circumstances a dragon might be able to survive it?”

Sun Wukong was a former great *youkai*, a master of sage arts and *youkai* magic who’d been deified as a buddha. I wondered what he’d sensed upon seeing the Snake of Eden’s curse.

“First of all,” he began, “the flesh wouldn’t survive. Given the concentration of the curse, the body would be the first thing to go. The soul would be second. There’s nothing so fragile as a soul bereft of its physical shell. In short order, it too would be consumed. Now, here’s the problem: Why didn’t the Evil Pieces, inextricably linked to the soul, succumb to the curse as well? Yes, this old man has heard what happened to your Red Dragon Emperor. Only the pieces made their way back to your master, correct?”

He already knew? The old Sun Wukong was frighteningly astute.

“Yes, only the Pawn pieces reacted to the summoning.”

“And did you sense Samael’s curse on them?”

“No. We only felt it through the Dragon Gate. The pieces weren’t affected.”

Azazel had scrutinized the pieces after they returned to make sure. They were free from the curse.

However, Azazel had narrowed his eyes at that before leaving for Grigori headquarters.

Looking back, maybe that had been the first glimmer of doubt. When I and the others saw that only Issei’s Evil Pieces came back, we’d assumed the worst. Overcome with grief and having heard about similar cases in the past, we discarded the possibility that he might have somehow survived.

Sun Wukong blew a plume of smoke from his mouth, and his lips curled at the corners. “That means there’s at least a chance his soul is safe and sound. I can’t say what that lust-filled kid is doing right now for sure, but maybe he’s out drifting somewhere between dimensions?”

I fought to keep the upswelling of hope rising inside me from getting out of control.

It was too soon. Still too early to rejoice!

But there *was* a chance! A possibility that my friend might still be alive!

Seeing me positively trembling with hope, Sun Wukong broke into a grin before turning on his heel. “See ya. Yulong’s waiting for me outside... Oh, Bikou? What are *your* plans? I hear you’re on the run from every major power *and* the Khaos Brigade, too, now?”

Bikou tilted his head to one side, scratching at his cheek.

It was Kuroka beside him who raised her hand. “I’m sticking with our leader, *meow*. I mean, is there anything more fun than this?”

The mage Le Fay nodded. “Yes, I’ll remain, too! What about you, Arthur?” she asked.

Arthur, maintaining his usual quiet demeanor, flashed the room a soft smile. “I don’t have the faintest sense of attachment to the Hero Faction. If I stay here, I’ll be able to fight ever-stronger foes. And at the very least, life’s more comfortable with Vali than with Cao Cao.”

After hearing all this, Bikou faced Vali. “I’ll hang around, too, ’kay? *You’re* the only one fit to order us good-for-nothings around, Vali.”

The White Dragon Emperor frowned at this show of support. “...I’m sorry.”

“That ain’t like you! Don’t apologize, you Ass Dragon Emperor!” Bikou said with a loud guffaw, slapping Vali on the back.

“Stop it. You’ll make Albion cry. He’s going to need counseling at this rate.”

Evidently, Albion had been pushed to the brink like Ddraig. Was that why he’d been so quiet back in the artificial dimension? Had he lacked the mental fortitude to speak?

Sun Wukong blew another cloud of smoke from his pipe. “The Red Dragon Emperor attracts the masses to him, while the White Dragon Emperor attracts stragglers. The two Heavenly Dragons. Polar opposites. You’re an interesting pair, you are.”

With those parting words, Sun Wukong stepped out of the room.

After checking to ensure he’d really left, I said, “Vali Lucifer, what do you plan to do?”

“Would it satisfy you if I said I was going to avenge Issei Hyoudou?”

“I would say that doesn’t sound like you. Besides, we’re the ones who will avenge him. That’s our job. *My* job.”

Vali forced a grin. “I see. Yes, you’re right... I’ll have to find someone else to vent my fury to. I suppose there is no shortage of people after me.”

With that fearless smile and raging fighting spirit, he was the spitting image of a battle maniac.

Having asked Sun Wukong what I wished to know, I left the basement, pondering when and how to share this information with a certain someone, when...

“Yuuto. There you are.”

A voice called to me from behind. It was Lady Grayfia.

She wasn’t dressed in her usual maid outfit, however. No, her hair was done

up in a long braid, and she was wearing a close-fitting suit of armor that highlighted her proportions.

I understood what this meant at once—she was here as a member of the Demon King’s Familia.

“Grayfia... Are you going to the front lines?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “With the Holy Spear still unaccounted for, Sirzechs can’t venture out in public. So I and the rest of his Familia will fight the approaching monstrosity, this Jabberwocky, in his place. At the very least, we will attempt to halt its progress to the capital.”

I was sure they’d be successful after hearing her say that so confidently.

Others had already tried various techniques against the huge anti-monsters, freezing them, teleporting them, and even opening huge pits beneath their feet. But all efforts had failed to slow the creatures.

Apparently, magic and techniques that altered space and time were ineffective. The creatures must have been made to resist such attacks.

To think that the Annihilation Maker could conjure up beings so formidable... I was forced to grapple with the danger of the myriad possibilities posed by that Longinus.

I could understand why the higher-ups had ranked it as a god-slaying Longinus and why they’d considered sealing it away.

But even so, if there was anyone who could stop that thing, it was Lucifer’s Familia. Its members were renowned as some of the most powerful demons alive.

My sword master was a member of that Familia and a Knight to boot. Nothing could stand against his skill.

“Could you give this to Rias?” Grayfia passed me a handwritten note. “It contains information from Sirzechs and Governor Azazel.”

Sirzechs...*and* Azazel?

“What is it?”

I knew that it was rude for me to pry, but all the same, I glanced down at the piece of paper. *Ajuka Beelzebub* and *base* were written on it in large demon letters.

“The present whereabouts of Ajuka Beelzebub. I also have a message from Governor Azazel. ‘Have him take a look at Issei’s pieces. He’ll be able to analyze whatever’s left.’ That’s it. Take Rias and the others with you, Yuuto. If there is even the faintest possibility, Lord Ajuka will find it.”

Ajuka Beelzebub was the one who created the Evil Pieces system in the first place. I’d been hoping to reach him myself... Azazel had managed to get this information ahead of us. He had his hands full with everything else, yet he still spared thought for us...

Thank you, Azazel. Surely Lord Ajuka will be able to find something.

Grayfia fixed me with a warm smile. “I won’t allow my future brother-in-law to perish so easily. Find proof that he’s alive as quickly as possible to rekindle Rias’s spirit. It’s unbecoming for one of our most promising youths to idle while the underworld faces a crisis of this magnitude. I truly believe both she and Issei will carry our futures on their shoulders.”

Issei, your future sister-in-law is definitely kind, but if you ask me, she’s pretty demanding, too.

Life.-2

Buddies

It was late at night by the time the six of us—the president, Akeno, Asia, Koneko, Ravel, and I—reached the location indicated on the note from Grayfia.

After bumping into Grayfia, I was able to lure the president out of her room with this new information about Issei. The others had likewise joined once they heard the news.

And so here we were, clutching at straws.

We were around eight train stops from where we all lived in the human world, standing in front of a deserted building on the outskirts of town. There was no one to be seen.

This, apparently, was one of Ajuka Beelzebub's hideouts in the human world.

I never would have imagined that he would base himself so close. I hadn't sensed him at all... Then again, it would be pretty funny to detect a Demon King trying to lie low.

We stepped into the abandoned building to find the first-floor lobby bustling with activity. Young people talked among themselves in small groups.

They weren't demons. I didn't sense a hint of demonic energy, although there was *something* strange about them. Each and every person here seemed to have a distinct aura, like they all possessed a unique ability.

One of the groups noticed us, and its members quickly pulled out their cell phones and held them up at us.

"They're demons, man. And look at those *levels*, those *ranks*...!"

At that, the other humans retrieved their phones and scanned us as well. Every last one of them was staring at the screen of their device with a grim expression.

They'd recognized that we were demons. And their phones had some way of measuring potential?

At that point, my thoughts went to Ajuka Beelzebub and his hobbies. Apparently, he'd designed a video game in the human world.

These phones probably had something to do with that. How else could these people have worked out our identities?

I hated being the focus of all this attention... Our best bet was to leave as quickly as possible and find Ajuka Beelzebub. I didn't think these people would attack us, but you could never be entirely sure...

At that moment, a figure with a demonic aura like ours stepped into view from the back of the room.

"My apologies. This is what they call a *lobby* in the gaming industry..." The woman was dressed in a suit, and unlike everyone else present, she was a demon.

The woman offered us a polite bow, gesturing to the elevator at the back of the room. "This way, please. Lord Ajuka is waiting for you on the rooftop."

We took the elevator to the highest stop, and the female demon guided us to a garden on the roof.

Greenery ringed the large space on all sides. The wind was cold, owing to the late hour. The moon overhead served as the only source of light, but being demons, we could easily make out our surroundings thanks to our night vision.

The woman gave us another bow before withdrawing. Then a new figure called out to us. "Is that the Gremory Familia? I wasn't expecting so many of you."

Glancing around, I spotted a young man sitting on a chair in the center of the garden. His figure carried mesmerizing charm and atmosphere.

"Lord Ajuka," the president said, stepping forward.

Yes, this was Ajuka Beelzebub himself.

The Demon King reached for a cup of tea before replying. "I heard the news. You got caught up in a terrible situation. Then again, that's nothing new for you

all, is it? You've been hit by incident after incident for a while now."

The president approached the Demon King without hesitation. "There's something I'd like you to take a look at, Lord Ajuka." She retrieved Issei's Pawn pieces from her pocket.

"Yes, by all means... But you will have to wait." Ajuka Beelzebub stopped her with a wave of his hand, directing our attention to the back of the garden. "You and your entourage aren't my only guests."

Only then did we notice the other presences.

Behind the trees and shrubbery were other demons like us.

"I didn't expect to find a false Demon King in the human world, Ajuka."

Each of the men possessed an intense aura. All of them were surely high-class demons, if not greater. They looked like they knew how to handle themselves in a fight.

By accusing Ajuka Beelzebub of being a false Demon King, they had made their affiliation obvious.

Ajuka Beelzebub broke into a laugh. "That's the charm of you people—one can recognize you from your tone."

"Don't forget *me*," came a familiar voice from the darkness.

A young white-haired man appeared. Siegfried. The Khaos Brigade was here with the old Demon King regime.

Terrible rage gathered in me at the sight of him. It was a struggle just to keep it down... *Not yet. Not now.* I could let loose later.

"*They're* the ones who killed him..."

Akeno and the others behind me were positively murderous. Their power seeped into the very air. Now that opponents had arrived, the Gremory Familia was ready for a fight.

That was only natural. These were Issei's enemies. The women of the Gremory Familia weren't so depressed that they'd let a chance for vengeance slip by.

Only Asia seemed to feel differently. “Why did Issei have to get dragged into all the underworld’s problems...?”

Asia... You know Issei. If his loved ones or the children of the underworld are in danger, he leaps into action. That’s Issei Hyoudou, our Red Dragon Emperor.

This didn’t add up, though. Weren’t the old demon regime and the hero faction supposed to be at odds? Why were they working together?

“Greetings, Ajuka Beelzebub. I am Siegfried, of a certain band of heroes. And these good people are followers of your old Demon King regime who’ve offered me their cooperation.”

So those loyal to the old Demon King regime really have joined with the Hero Faction? What a headache.

“I know you. You used to serve the church, didn’t you, Siegfried? You were one of its highest-ranked warriors. Quite the threat as far as we were concerned, until you changed sides, at least. I believe they called you Chaos Edge Sieg... All right, what can I do for you? I have visitors, so let’s make this quick.” The Demon King spoke quietly, his hands folded atop the table.

Siegfried aside, the demons from the old Demon King regime were positively overflowing with hostility. They were like tinderboxes ready to blow. They were bound to attack at the slightest provocation from Ajuka.

The Demon King was clearly aware of this, yet he remained expertly composed. He was a little different to Sirzechs in that respect.

“I’m here to extend the same offer we gave to you earlier... Join us, Ajuka Beelzebub.”

—!

We were all taken aback by this!

To think that a band of terrorists would try to recruit a Demon King...

I gathered that this offer hadn’t been extended to all the Demon Kings, just Ajuka Beelzebub.

“You are one of the Four Great Demon Kings,” Siegfried continued. “Yet you subscribe to a different train of thought than Sirzechs Lucifer. You have your

own philosophy. Your research and technology surpass any competition. With one word, you could recruit followers to rival Sirzechs's."

I had heard something like this once before.

There were four main factions within the current demon government, each led by advisers loyal to one of the Demon Kings. Among them, Sirzechs's and Ajuka's camps were said to be the strongest.

The two factions cooperated when it came to government work, but they often butted heads on specific policies. According to news reports in the underworld, those differences of opinion were primarily based on approaches to demon technology.

Ajuka sighed. "Yes, I'm a Demon King, and I do have my own personal views that may occasionally put me at odds with my responsibilities. I've turned Sirzechs's requests down many times. To someone looking in from the outside, that might seem like I object to his ideas and prefer my personal pursuits, like the video game I manage."

Siegfried let out a low chuckle. "Your *hobby* has caused us all a lot of trouble."

If I understood correctly, Ajuka Beelzebub's video game somehow hindered the Khaos Brigade.

"I could say the same thing to you," the Demon King shot back.

Siegfried shrugged. "You're the only Demon King who can truly compete with Sirzechs Lucifer, and that's what we find appealing. We've heard that you're both irregular demons, so to speak, the targets of envy and fear by the descendants of the old Demon Kings. If one of you were to join us, we would be a force to be reckoned with."

Ajuka rested his hands under his chin, and there was vague amusement in his relaxed expression. "I see. Yes, it might be fun to turn terrorist to antagonist Sirzechs a little. It would probably be worth it just to see the look on his face when he found out."

Was he serious? I had no way of knowing...but he seemed to find this all rather entertaining.

“We can provide you with information and research reports as well,” Siegfried added. “For someone always looking to remain on the cutting edge, I can assure you that they will be of immense value.”

“I see.” Ajuka nodded along to these honeyed words. “Access to the Khaos Brigade’s intel and research. Hmm. That is enticing.”

I honestly couldn’t tell if he was being genuine...

Ajuka Beelzebub closed his eyes for a moment. Upon opening them, he declared firmly, “But I have no such need. As tempting as your offer of an alliance is to me personally, I’m afraid I’ll have to refuse.”

Siegfried was unbothered by this rejection, although the hostility coming from the demons behind him jumped up a level.

“I have a great many questions, but I’ll keep this simple,” Siegfried said. “Why?”

“I’m able to devote myself to my interests because Sirzechs *does* take my wishes into consideration. I’ve known him—or rather, we have known each other—for a very, very long time. He is the only person I can truly call a friend. I know him better than anyone else, and he knows me just as well. I’m only a Demon King because he chose to become one. So you see, we have quite the bond.”

Ajuka Beelzebub and Sirzechs were old acquaintances. Apparently, they’d been rivals since they were young.

There was undoubtedly something between them that only they fully understood.

Ajuka Beelzebub seemed unyielding on this, which probably made rejecting the terrorists’ offer a simple thing.

Siegfried nodded, his expression still unchanged... He must have anticipated this outcome.

“I see. Declining our offer on account of a friend. I can’t say I fully understand the reasoning, but I did suspect this might happen,” he said with a dry smile.

The followers of the old Demon King regime, however, were quick to make

their displeasure known.

“We told you, didn’t we? This man! He and Sirzechs arrogantly rule the underworld for their own gain! He may have brought technological prosperity, but we can’t let him rule! No Demon King should care only to play games and satisfy his whims!”

“Now’s the time to annihilate him! Erase him from the face of the earth! I, a descendant of a *true* Demon King, will exterminate you!”

Ajuka Beelzebub chuckled at the show of anger. “Ah, yes. Tell me, do you say much the same thing to anyone connected with the underworld’s current government? I find your resentment neither elegant nor interesting... In fact, it’s boring.”

The followers of the old Demon King regime didn’t take kindly to being cut down so ruthlessly.

“You dare taunt us, Ajuka?!”

The situation had reached its breaking point. This could very well be the start of a pitched battle. The rest of the Gremory Familia and I readied ourselves for combat...

Ajuka Beelzebub unlinked his hands, raising one to conjure a small magic circle. “I know talk is pointless. All right, I’ll do a Demon King’s work for the first time in who knows how long... I’ll make you all disappear.”

““““Don’t screw with us!””””

Enraged, the followers of the old Demon King regime loosed simultaneous attacks, firing massive waves of demonic energy from their palms!

They were tremendous, enough to deal fatal injuries if we let down our guard!

However, Ajuka remained unfazed. He simply adjusted the small magic circle in his hand. The mathematical formulas and demon letters that comprised them whirled at high speed.

A split second before the attack connected, the waves of demonic energy went veering off course, cutting through the night sky.

The enemy demons went aghast.

Meanwhile, Ajuka Beelzebub remained seated, having barely moved a muscle. “You knew about my abilities, right? Don’t tell me you thought your attack would get through that easily. Maybe you believed you’d all powered up enough? Either way, none of you stand a chance.”

Several of the enemy demons twitched visibly but otherwise received Ajuka’s remark with an embarrassed silence.

If I had to guess, they likely had tried to power up before this. Sirzechs and Ajuka were heroes who’d fought on the front lines against the old Demon King regime. Stories of their exploits were known all across the underworld, owing in no small part to their considerable might.

Allegedly Sirzechs possessed immense reserves of power of annihilation with the ability to destroy anything. Ajuka Beelzebub, on the other hand, was so skilled that he could manipulate all manner of phenomena with mathematical formulas.

The enemy demons must have tried to boost their strength because of that. Yet they hadn’t even come close to breaking through.

Ajuka Beelzebub had effortlessly deflected their attack.

Indeed, I could see the growing fear show on the demons’ faces.

“From my perspective, every single phenomenon and ability in existence is determined by a fixed set of rules,” Ajuka Beelzebub explained calmly. “I derive solutions through the application of equations. I’ve always loved math. Naturally, my abilities follow that passion, too. Have a look—I can even do this.” Ajuka turned his gaze to the sky.

Puzzled, we followed suit...

A faint sound cutting through the wind gradually grew louder.

One of those waves of energy that had been sent off course just a moment ago was approaching!

The bombardment of demonic energy came crashing down on the very men who’d hurled it!

“—.”

One of them was obliterated by the downpour before he could so much as scream.

Those who managed to dodge were horrified to discover that the tide of energy changed its course to chase them down.

“He’s controlling our attacks!”

“I can do *this* as well.” The Demon King adjusted the letters and equations in his magic circle once again.

Those formulas and letters were evidently a unique equation used to calculate and manipulate phenomena.

The wave of demonic energy pursued its targets, then burst into a volley of bullets. Other waves broke apart into thin lines, each relentlessly chasing its fleeing target.

Watching him manipulate other demons’ attacks and change their effects so easily was incredible.

And so quickly, too. Ajuka controlled those attacks like they were his own, both the initial waves and the divided ones... That he could manipulate them and improve on them simultaneously was nothing short of amazing!

“D-damn yooooouuuuu!”

Realizing that they couldn’t hope to avoid the attacks, the opposing demons unleashed a second strike. From the intensity of the light gathering around their hands, it was clear this would be at least as strong as the last strike—perhaps even more so.

And yet the luminous wave that Ajuka Beelzebub had seized control of scattered the would-be counterattack and tore through the demons, each energy projectile ripping a hole through its intended target.

Had the Demon Lord managed to make the blasts even stronger?

Not only had he shifted their trajectory; he’d altered their shape, speed, and power level as well...

“So this is his Kankara Formula...?”

“To do all that while barely moving a finger... Just how strong is this guy? And what does it say of Sirzechs?”

The followers of the old Demon King regime breathed their last breath while ruing their defeat.

Such was the power of the Demon King Ajuka Beelzebub. He had defeated his foes while keeping the true extent of his powers under wraps.

After all, he hadn't even stood from his chair...

It was awe-inspiring, beyond astonishing. Those other demons weren't weak by any means. Yet he'd buried them with no more than a slight movement of his hand...

This was why he and Sirzechs were considered a class of demon unto themselves.

With the opposing demons defeated, Ajuka Beelzebub turned his attention to the last man standing. “Only you remain, heroic Siegfried. I wonder what your next move will be.”

Siegfried merely shrugged. “I still have a few trump cards left. Maybe I'll use one before falling back.”

His smirk stoked anger in me. Was this outrage? Fury?

Ajuka Beelzebub seemed to find Siegfried's remarks humorous. “Oh, that does sound interesting... However...” He paused to glance my way. “The Gremory Knight over there has been champing at the bit for a good while now.”

—.

The Demon King had sensed my pent-up rage.

“How about it?” Ajuka Beelzebub asked with a snap of his fingers. “Why don't *you* fight him? From the looks of it, you seem to know this errant hero already. And don't worry about the building and the garden. They're quite sturdy. Your attacks shouldn't be able to break them.”

I couldn't have asked for more.

Truth be told, I was about to lose control without a way to vent.

I stepped forward.

“...Yuuto?” the president asked, visibly concerned by my behavior.

“I’m doing this, President. I’d greatly appreciate it if you’d fight alongside me.”

I stepped forward, summoning a Holy Demon Sword in my hands.

Issei...

When I realized you weren’t coming back, I first thought of what you said to me.

“Hey, Kiba. Let’s make a promise. If one of us dies, the other will fight even harder to make up for the loss.”

Issei had said that to me during one of our training sessions out of nowhere.

“What are you talking about? Neither of us is about to die,” I answered him.

I remember Issei responding with a broad grin.

“Yeah. I’m not planning on kicking the bucket. But you know, we always end up fighting all these strong enemies. We’ve already been in countless battles where it wouldn’t have been all that weird if one of us had died.

“And you never know what the future might hold, right? So I thought we should make a promise just in case. If one of us dies, the other one will fight on for them.

“Ah! Like I said, I’m not planning on dying on anything! I still haven’t taken the virginity of the woman I love!

“And I don’t want you to die, either. I’d hate to lose my buddy”.

Yeah. I hate losing my friends, too.

You always said you would be back soon, Issei. That you would return. But you didn’t.

I’ve tried to support the others after losing you. I knew that they would give in to despair after such a loss.

I'd pushed my emotions aside to keep them from getting the better of me.

We'd made a promise, after all.

However, I was at my breaking point now. When someone you despised so thoroughly showed their face, there was no holding back...

I lost my best friend to this guy's stupid plan!

My first true friend. And this man had robbed me of him...

There was no way I could forgive him!

Understand, Issei? Let me take out my anger on him, just a little.

I readied my Holy Demon Sword and fixed my foe within my sights. Hatred burned in my eyes. "Siegfried. Sorry about this, but I'm about to unleash my rage on you. My friend is gone because of you and your allies. That's reason enough for you to die."

The white-haired swordsman's mouth hung open in amusement as he took in my murderous aura. "You seem stronger than before... Interesting. Perhaps we share a mysterious fate, your Gremory Familia and me, huh? I certainly didn't expect to bump into you all here. Oh well... All right then, best friend of the Red Dragon Emperor. Let's settle this."

Four dragon arms emerged from Siegfried's back—his Balance Breaker. Without the slightest hesitation, each hand drew a demon sword from his belt.

I dashed forward, armed with my own blade!

Although I sped for Siegfried, he caught my attack with a single stroke of one demon sword!

Impressive. He'd anticipated my movements. He would claim the advantage if this match stretched on for too long. I would have to strike a conclusive blow with my Dragon Slayer quickly.

"..."

After I'd stopped my strike, Siegfried's eyes narrowed in thought.

While I returned the look with a puzzled one of my own, he nodded and sighed. "Even if I won, fighting you as you are now would place me in serious

jeopardy. I might defeat you, but Rias Gremory or Akeno Himejima would just join the fray. They might even kill me. Walking away doesn't seem like such a bad idea by comparison... But if I was to flee after failing to recruit Ajuka Beelzebub, without even trying to stand up against the Gremory Familia, my colleagues and subordinates would disapprove. I certainly don't want Heracles or Jeanne making a fool out of me."

Siegfried rummaged through his pocket while talking to himself and pulled out a handgun.

No, not quite a handgun. Judging by its sharp tip...it was a pistol-grip syringe.

Before injecting himself in the neck, Siegfried flashed me a sardonic grin. "We perfected this with help from Shalba Beelzebub from the old Demon King regime. You might consider it a doping agent...for Sacred Gears."

"You're going to fortify your Sacred Gear, then?" I asked.

Siegfried nodded.

Was this what they'd been researching? I knew that they'd been experimenting with Ophis's serpents, using them directly on Sacred Gears to forcefully draw out certain traits.

"What do you think will happen if someone injects themselves with the blood of a true Demon King, the archenemy of the biblical God responsible for the Sacred Gear system?" Siegfried asked. "That was the question our research aimed to answer. It required considerable sacrifice, and the collection of huge amounts of data, but finally we managed to fuse sacred items with raw demon essence."

The blood of a Demon King?! Taken from a descendent of a true Demon King no less? If Siegfried was telling the truth, then his people had used that to genuinely create a serum capable of bolstering Sacred Gears...

Siegfried glanced at Gram, one of his demon swords. "In truth, the full strength of the Demonic Emperor Sword, Gram, ought to be enough to beat you... Unfortunately, while you might say I was chosen by this blade, I'm also cursed by it. You know what I mean, don't you, Yuuto Kiba?"

Indeed, I understood exactly what he was saying. Gram was the most

powerful demon sword in existence, so it stood to reason he'd use it in this fight under normal circumstances. But Siegfried wasn't normal.

If the legends were true, Gram was an incredibly sharp blade possessing a destructive aura keen enough to cut through literally anything. It was probably fair to call it the demon sword equivalent of Durendal.

On top of that, it was also a Dragon Slayer, one responsible for killing one of the Five Great Dragon Kings, the Gigantis Dragon Fafnir (although the Norse gods later brought him back).

In other words, it had an impossible cutting edge and the ability to fell dragons. Gram combined the core characteristics of both the Durendal and Ascalon.

When you stopped to consider the unique qualities of Gram's wielder, Siegfried, the irony in this pairing became apparent immediately.

Siegfried's Sacred Gear was a variant Twice Critical, a dragon-type Sacred Gear.

Anyone with a regular Twice Critical wouldn't have too much of a problem wielding Gram to its full extent. However, that didn't hold for someone whose Balance Breaker enhanced their abilities as far as Siegfried's.

In short, the more he empowered himself, the more his affinity with Gram dropped.

If Siegfried dared to unleash his full potential, the recoil from Gram's dragon-slaying aura would probably annihilate him.

Issei, the Red Dragon Emperor, had only been able to store Ascalon in his gauntlet thanks to direct intervention from Heaven. He was an exception to the rule.

And while Siegfried possessed a variant Sacred Gear, he was certainly no exception...

The most powerful demon sword may have chosen him, but his abilities clearly didn't align with it... It was ironic, a prank of fate.

This man was a living test of the biblical God's Sacred Gear system.

Siegfried swung Gram around in a whirlwind motion beside him.

“In my Balance Breaker state, which completely nullifies its offensive aura, it makes for a well-balanced demon sword. But that also means I can’t call upon its full power... If I tried, I’d end up with a fatal wound for my trouble. This weapon doesn’t care anything for its owner’s body.”

Siegfried couldn’t wield Gram properly with his Balance Breaker. Thus, he had two options at his disposal: brandishing five demon swords, including a power-suppressed Gram, and one holy sword using his Twice Critical balance breaker; or wielding three demon swords, one of which being the full-power Gram, via his regular Twice Critical. Which option was more effective against us?

Naturally, it was the first choice.

“To use Gram at its best, then I have to fight you in my normal state. But that just doesn’t match up to wielding six different swords. Especially in a fight with *you*... I’d be in quite a bind without my Balance Breaker. But if I *could* use Gram with my Balance Breaker, things would be very different.”

Siegfried brought the syringe up to his neck and stuck it in.

There was a strange silence for a moment... Then Siegfried’s body pulsed audibly, and the sound grew as his body transformed.

With a strange, dull noise, the four arms extending from his back thickened. Siegfried’s fingers lost their shape and merged with the weapons they gripped. And the man’s metamorphosis didn’t stop with his limbs.

His expression intensified, and veins throbbed all over his face. Muscles writhed all across his body, as though bedeviled with eerie life. His hero uniform tore around the edges.

When the transformation was finally completed, Siegfried had been rendered a monster, complete with four extra arms so long and massive that they reached the ground.

Before, he’d resembled an Asura; now he was closer to a spider monster. His strength and menace were awesome and disturbing in equal measure.

His lips twitched into a twisted smile. “We call this state Chaos Drive. The drug

is Chaos Break. The names are based on your Balance Breakers and Juggernaut Drives.”

Even his voice had become monstrous, rumbling and deep.

“Wonderful. Every now and then, you humans invent things beyond the creations of angels and demons. I still think your kind has the most potential,” Ajuka Beelzebub remarked.

Siegfried, a mortal human, had fused with weapons forged by God and drawn strength from the blood of a Demon King. I was beginning to understand why all these incredible powers had been kept hidden from humans through the ages.

Humans evolved in the pursuit of their goals, and in the process, sometimes surpassed gods and demons.

The monster—Siegfried in demon form—stepped forward, and with that one movement, the atmosphere on the rooftop garden changed drastically. Miasma kicked up around us.

Those four burly arms from Siegfried’s Twice Critical began to writhe, and then...

...they shot my way!

Sensing them before I could see them, I started running. The next moment, a sharp spiral-shaped plume of energy erupted where I’d been standing, coalescing into a pillar of ice. The ground shattered with dimensional fissures.

It was a combination attack using his multiple demon swords! Had I been a second slower, my body would have been cleaved in five directions.

—!

Sensing an eerie chill approaching, I changed my Holy Demon Sword into a regular holy sword. Next, I materialized a single Dragon Knight and used it to launch myself into the air.

A second later, an extreme surge of aura blasted through the space where I’d stood! The Dragon Knight was vaporized without a trace!

I plunged down at Siegfried, catching him on his follow-through from his attack.

What an incredible blow! I'd dodged his attack, yet the aura shockwave still swept through my body, filling me with agonizing pain. A direct hit would have obliterated me.

Siegfried had barely charged his weapons. That destructive power rivaled Durendal's. No, in all likelihood, it surpassed it, given the speed of Siegfried's attack. I took some small comfort in knowing his strike lacked holy power, but that hardly meant I could take it easy.

After landing on the rooftop, I changed my weapon back into a Holy Demon Sword and closed in on my opponent, slashing from a flank, only to be easily deflected by one of his demon swords.

Each of those four extremely thick arms carried incredible destructive power. A direct hit from any of them would blow apart my body instantly. The radiant sword in his real left hand was the only non-demon sword. A Holy Demon Sword could probably destroy it, but the remaining five demon swords wouldn't go out so easily.

And so our duel continued. Siegfried blocked my high-speed attacks with his blades. His enlarged dragon arms should have been far easier targets, yet none of my strikes connected.

At times, Gram shone with a vicious aura in his right hand as it shot forward. With that power, Siegfried didn't need a direct hit to inflict serious damage.

The waves of energy radiating from those near misses gouged into the ground, turning the rooftop garden into a pit of dust and dirt. Undoubtedly the only reason the building endured was because Ajuka had reinforced it using his abilities.

With the amount of power on display, any normal structure would have long since collapsed.

All at once, five demon swords came flying toward me. By conjuring a Holy Demon Sword at my feet, I launched myself at my foe's flank! Naturally, I used a Dragon Slayer Holy Demon Sword! If I managed to get in a hit, the situation would be turned upside down!

Unfortunately, just when I thought my slash would connect...my Holy Demon

Sword shattered.

Was he somehow *physically* stronger than my Holy Demon Sword?!

Siegfried flashed me a fearless grin at this turn of events. “Looks like I’ve strengthened my body beyond even your Dragon Slayer Holy Demon Swords.”

He grabbed my leg, and just like that, he lifted me up into the air.

For a second, it felt like I was floating. I could imagine what was coming. He threw me hard into the ground!

He slammed me into the earth with all his strength and then swept down with a Demon Sword.

The impact tore through my body, carving a huge crater into the ground beneath.

My whole body cried out in agony, my bones literally cracking from the pressure...

Intense, unmanageable pain swept through me as I momentarily blacked out. Bloody vomit filled my mouth, staining the green garden red.

Even after the shock of being slammed into the ground and the hit from that demon sword, still my body continued to convulse.

My bones and flesh were broken all over... The damage was extensive.

Still, I couldn’t afford to lose here.

Fighting to keep myself conscious, I pulled myself to my feet. I fell back, adopted a fighting stance, and dashed for Siegfried again.

This time, he crossed a pair of Demon Swords to meet me.

“For someone with weak defenses like you, that last attack must have cost you a lot, no?” Siegfried laughed.

He was right. There was barely any strength left in my hands.

Siegfried pushed back with his weapons, sending me stumbling away. My legs were failing. At this rate, I would collapse soon. I gathered what energy I had left, pouring it into my feet. Just as my legs stopped shaking...

...they were enveloped in ice! Uh-oh! One of Siegfried's Demon Swords had frozen me! Without wasting a second, I tried channeling flame through my Holy Demon Sword to melt it away.

Unfortunately, two icy pillars rose from the ground, piercing my legs.

I had nowhere to escape, and Siegfried brought another Demon Sword down on me.

I summoned as many Holy Demon Swords in front of me as I could, hoping to use them as shields.

But the weapons were quickly destroyed. Siegfried's blade cleaved through my left shoulder without difficulty.

The loss of one arm wouldn't stop me. I tore through the ice holding me down using my fire sword and jumped back.

Blood gushed from the stump of my left arm. Channeling ice through my Holy Demon Sword, I froze the wound and the deep gashes in my legs. It was only a temporary measure, but it would stop the bleeding at least.

My whole body was racked with pain. My legs had been pierced... My legs, my pride and joy, were ruined.

"Yuuto!" the president called, looking desperate.

She continued to clutch Issei's Evil Pieces in her hands, looking around as if in expectation of something.

I know you want him to ride in and save the day, President. But he can't. You know that, right?

Why won't you get up? I chided myself. *If you lose your ability to press on, it will impact the whole group.*

Akeno and Koneko were clearly at a loss for what to do, unable to so much as move. Without Issei, everyone had lost the mental strength needed to fight.

They all harbored a murderous desire for revenge, but that wasn't enough to propel them forward.

Sairaorge Bael, there's no way we can help save the underworld from its crisis!

I lacked Issei's charisma. I didn't have what it took to inspire people like he did.

"Kiba's going to die, too... No... I—I can't stand to watch..."

Asia frantically raised her hands in my direction. She was probably trying to send healing power, but it was so weak that it had zero effect.

The shock of losing Issei was clearly affecting her. Sacred Gears were driven by one's strength of will.

Akeno and the president tried to summon their demonic powers, but even combined, they were a far cry from their regular strength. Siegfried deflected the attacks with ease.

Koneko's fighting spirit and Ravel's wings of flame were similarly impotent.

The girls were little more than ghosts of their usual selves.

I had to protect them. I had to take Issei's place now.

I pulled out one of the vials of Phoenix Tears that Ruval Phenex gave us, and I sprinkled the contents onto my wounds.

The pain abated instantly, and the wounds closed. My severed arm didn't regenerate, however.

Would I have to retrieve it later and physically reattach it?

Mending my wounds did little to replenish my strength, surely owing to the excessive blood loss. I could barely keep myself on my feet.

My legs trembled as I tried to stand. I was pathetic, truly.

Sorry, everyone. Sorry I'm so weak.

Siegfried broke into a sneer. "Such a pitiful sight. Are you the same Gremory Familia I fought the other day? Considering how angry you all seem, I'd hoped you all would have joined, but if this is all you can muster..."

I hated to prove him right, but this was the best I could manage.

Issei had always been with me in the past, by my side, ahead of me, or guarding my back.

I never imagined fighting without him would be so painful. If he were here, I'd be able to stand.

"Issei Hyoudou died for nothing. He charged into the dimensional void to save Ophis, right? But he and Shalba wound up killing each other? We haven't seen Shalba since, so I have to assume that's what happened. If that guy were still alive, he would have declared war against all of us and tried to seize power in the underworld. You know, if your Issei Hyoudou had ignored Shalba, left Ophis, and returned with you all, perhaps you could have gone after Shalba in better fighting condition. That was the problem with your Red Dragon Emperor—he never thought ahead."

...

My mind turned white, and seething black fury boiled up from deep inside me.

Issei Hyoudou. Died. For. Nothing.

For nothing? Issei...?

Cut the shit... Shut the hell up!

My whole body shook, overcome with regret, with grief over the promise we'd made. My legs shivered; I poured strength into my feet and slowly pulled myself up.

"Aaaaarrrrrgggghhhhh!" I screamed to the heavens. The sound came from the pit of my stomach, surging.

Then came the voice of my best friend, born anew in my mind: "*Kiba. We're men of the Gremory Familia.*"

Yes, I know, Issei!

"So no matter what, you've got to stand up and fight."

Right. No matter the opponent, we have to hold our ground!

"I'm not done yet..."

Taking one staggering step after another, I trudged for Siegfried, summoning a new Holy Demon Sword.

“I can still fight! I have to keep standing! Just like he would! Issei Hyoudou gave his all for the Gremory Familia. He would face any foe without hesitation!”

If I went down here, I’d never be able to look him in the eye again!

Isn’t that right, Issei? How could I call myself your friend if I quit here?!

“Don’t you dare speak ill of the Red Dragon Emperor! Don’t you dare mock my best friend!” I roared, tears in my eyes.

My voice was the only thing with any strength.

“It’s pointless!” Siegfried shot back. “Come after me like your Red Dragon Emperor all you want—even you have your limits! You may be talented, but you’re still just a regular old demon, a reincarnated human! You can’t overcome such grievous injuries!”

I know. I can’t push my body any further than I already have. I can’t even grip my sword properly.

But... But... Issei would never give up!

I need it... Even just a fraction will do. Please...

If only I had that drive, the strength of will that kept him forever pushing forward!

Just as I was about to throw myself into an attack...

...a brilliant red flash burst from the corner of my eyes.

“Issei’s Pawn pieces.”

Those pieces, still clutched tightly in the president’s hands, were glowing. One of them floated into the air, shining brighter and brighter, painting the night crimson.

Then the piece floated my way, growing ever more radiant.

I had to close my eyes against the blinding light. And when I opened them...

A holy sword hovered before me—Ascalon.



“Issei’s Pawn piece...turned into Ascalon?”

“Let’s go, buddy.”

“—.”

Issei’s voice had reached me from some distant place.

Tears spilled from my eyes without end... How generous was he? Even reduced to no more than his Evil Pieces, he still tried to help...

After wiping my tears away, I took Ascalon.

“You’re right, Issei! Let’s go! With you here, I can keep fighting! Just lend me your power! No matter the enemy, we’ll cut clean through them!”

The courage, the reassurance I felt through Ascalon, was real.

I could feel it in my heart. This was just like actually fighting by Issei’s side.

Yes, we can do this. This ought to be enough. I—I can fight now!

My legs stopped trembling. Incredible energy spread from the depths of my body.

Gripping Ascalon as firmly as I could, I unleashed a wide slash straight at Siegfried!

Although he parried, he was clearly taken aback.

“...! Impossible! How can you still stand...?! Not even you should be able to move after losing that much blood...!”

“Not according to *him*. *He’s* telling me to keep going. To get up. If he can say all that through this blade, then I don’t have any other choice!”

Ascalon—this Dragon Slayer Holy Sword—let out a huge blast of power.

I could sense a change in Siegfried as smoke rose from his body.

His countenance was pained.

“What...?! That power...? From the sword...?”

Ah, so Ascalon is enough to damage his flesh? Siegfried had strengthened himself against Gram’s effects, but Ascalon was another matter.

Yes, this might work!

Just as I was about to launch a fresh attack, Siegfried's Gram released a brilliant light.

Was he up to something? Sensing danger, I fell back. But I was quickly proven wrong.

Gram's energy was directed at me, yet it wasn't hostile. Somehow, it seemed welcoming.

"—! Gram?! The Demonic Emperor Sword is responding...to Yuuto Kiba?! Is this because I used Chaos Break?!" Siegfried cried in alarm.

There was only one explanation for his panic... Gram had chosen a new master.

"Come to me, Gram!" I extended a hand. "If you've chosen me, then let me take you!"

At this, Gram shone more intensely, as though to reject its current wielder. The light turned so harsh that it burned the fingers clasped around the hilt.

The weapon flew through the air, piercing the ground before me.

Siegfried shook his head, unable to believe his eyes. "I-impossible...! Even reduced to his pieces, the Red Dragon Emperor has managed all this?! How can he still fight?! How can he bring you back from the brink?!"

Although Gram had chosen me, I hardly had the strength to lift it.

That's when several figures stepped forward—Asia, Koneko, and Ravel.

Koneko was cradling my severed arm, and she pressed it against the wound at my shoulder. Asia rested her hand atop it, and a soft green light emitted from her palm. Meanwhile, Ravel held my body securely in place.

Soothed by that gentle power, my arm fused back to my shoulder, and its functions returned.

Asia, Koneko, and Ravel were all crying. Each of them carried one of Issei's Pawn pieces in their hands.

"Issei told me we have to fight. I can hear his voice through his Evil Piece,"

Asia said with a forced smile, doing all she could to keep from sobbing.

“...He spoke to me, too. ‘I need you to give my buddy a hand,’ he said.” Koneko likewise flashed me a faint smile as she used her sage arts to help mend my wounds.

Their auras were warming, their love and generosity boundless.

“I think I heard him as well. ‘Look after Koneko and the others for me.’ I’m not even really part of the group... He’s just too kind!” Ravel wiped away tears and forced a grin.

“‘Keep fighting by everyone’s side.’ Right. That’s just the sort of thing he would say.” The president stepped forward, holding the remaining pieces.

Her eyes were damp, but there was newfound strength in them, too.

“My adorable servants! Let’s work together as a Familia—to send our enemy packing!”

She was back.

The president was talking like her usual self again. *Ah, Issei, she’s back!*

Now we could fight. We could take on anyone and everyone!

Thanks to Asia, my dismembered arm was reattached. And that’s all I needed to take hold of Gram.

...An immense force reached me through the blade. So this was Gram, the legendary Demonic Emperor Sword.

No matter how strong Siegfried’s body might have become, it couldn’t possibly withstand this blade’s dragon-slaying aura combined with the Ascalon’s similar powers.

And so, readying both blades, I poured my strength into my legs.

It was time for round two. But this time, things were going to be different.

I wasn’t alone anymore—I had the Gremory Familia at my back!

The president, Asia, Koneko, and Ravel all had Siegfried fixed within their sights.

Just as the president unleashed a wave of destructive power from her hand, I leaped into action.

“Not yet! I’m still the descendant of a legendary hero. I can still—”

A flash of light burst above Siegfried head, a full-strength lightning bolt that engulfed him and everything around him.

Glancing upward, I spied Akeno, her six black fallen angel wings spread wide. She looked like a true high-class fallen angel indeed.

“A fallen angel transformation is my final resort. I asked Azazel and my father to strengthen my blood to improve my holy lightning.”

Akeno had bracelets around both wrists. Both were engraved with demon characters that let out a golden light. Were they boosting her powers somehow? No, they likely only awakened her dormant fallen angel abilities. Azazel and Baraqiel must have helped with the bracelets in some way.

“Sorry, Issei. I know you want me to show everyone my usual smile. I couldn’t before...but it’s all right now! I can fight!” Akeno declared with fresh determination.

Thank goodness. With this, our Two Great Ladies had returned!

Siegfried, having taken the full brunt of a superpowered lightning attack, was scorched black, smoke billowed from his body. The holy lightning bombardment had been incredible. And that was after Siegfried had fortified his body with that drug of his. It was a testament to how much stronger Akeno’s lightning had become.

The president’s follow-up attack was just as potent, causing the oversized dragon arms extending from Siegfried’s back to burst into nothingness.

Time to finish this, Siegfried!

With a dull tear, both the Holy Sword Ascalon and the Demon Sword Gram skewered Siegfried from the front.

“I’ve...lost?” He gasped, blood spilling from his mouth.

He lifted a hand to stroke the blade of the weapon that had rejected him, Gram, only searing his fingers again for his trouble. Siegfried laughed

sardonically.

I pulled the two swords free. “We won, Issei.”

No blood flowed from Siegfried’s body. After being pierced by two Dragon Slayers, his flesh was crumbling.

Cracks ran down Siegfried’s body, enveloping him.

Smoke rose while his flesh fell apart. Siegfried’s eyes narrowed as he let out a weak laugh. “Ha-ha-ha... So even in death, Issei Hyoudou won’t give up the fight...!”

He turned to me and the others. The cracks had reached his face.

“Why don’t you use Phoenix Tears?” I asked. “The Hero Faction has their own supply, right?”

They’d used them during the battle in Kyoto. It wouldn’t have been surprising if Siegfried still held a vial or two. Yet he didn’t try to use one, even as his body fell apart. The sight struck me as unreal.

Siegfried shook his head. “Phoenix Tears won’t work while someone is in this state... We don’t yet know why...”

Evidently, that power-up had its weaknesses. Users couldn’t expect to recover from major injuries. The Hero Faction would likely take that into account in the future.

“I knew it... There’s no normal life...for a church warrior...who grew up in that institute...”

Those were his final words before his form turned to ash.

-○○●○-

We were the last ones standing, having emerged victorious over Siegfried and the followers of the old Demon King regime.

The president showed Ajuka Beelzebub Issei’s Evil Pieces. The one that had transformed into Ascalon a moment ago was back to its original form.

Had Issei left something in that piece? Ajuka suggested that Ascalon’s residual aura responded to our plight and came to our aid.

In any event, our thoughts and feelings for Issei were what triggered that phenomenon. We were overjoyed to know that Issei was still by our side in some way.

A chessboard appeared on Ajuka's table, and he placed the Pawn pieces in their respective starting positions.

Next, he activated a small magic circle and set about inspecting the pieces.

After a moment, he breathed an inquisitive sigh. "Hmm, this is interesting..."

"Did you learn something?" the president asked.

"Of these eight pieces, four have transformed into mutation pieces," the Demon King said, touching one of them with a finger. "However, they all have different values... What a frightful development. That Triaina ability and his crimson armor must be contained within them. He has combined the powers of a Heavenly Dragon with the Evil Pieces system much more harmoniously than I ever would have imagined. Yes, it was a good thing I made a few adjustments recently. Fascinating... Is he exerting his will directly on the pieces themselves, perhaps?"

So of Issei's eight pieces, half were now mutation ones... Back when he was reborn as a demon, they were all normal Pawns. The president had used her only mutation piece to recruit Gasper.

Frankly, this change was incredible. Was it the result of the factor that Ajuka had given Issei a while back? Those breast powers that Issei had developed must have played a role, too. Regardless, this was textbook Issei.

"What else have you found out from the pieces...?" the president questioned.

Everyone, myself included, listened intently to what Ajuka had to say.

"What I can tell you is this," the Demon King began. "I don't know the specifics of his situation, but there is a high probability that he's alive somewhere in the dimensional void. Death isn't the last data entry in these pieces. The soul of the Red Dragon Emperor is still contained within his Sacred Gear. In all likelihood, both Issei Hyoudou and the Boosted Gear are still together. These pieces haven't stopped functioning and can be used again. Only on him, mind you—they still contain his records. No, it would be more accurate

to say that you can *return* them to him.”

—!

...

An indescribable feeling coursed through my heart.

We were left at a loss for words.

“The vessel that accepted these pieces—his soul and body—is certainly unstable,” Ajuka explained. “Samael’s curse has probably rendered his body beyond salvation. The data from his pieces makes that very clear. But as far as I can tell, his soul endures, affected as it has been by the poison. Normally, a soul doesn’t last much longer than the body, but in this case... The Evil Pieces suggest that he’s alive, despite his body being destroyed. It’s difficult to imagine how that’s possible, but Governor Azazel’s people tell me that Ophis was with Issei. Perhaps that explains his survival despite a corporeal form.”

“Even if his soul is safe, without a body... What can we do?” I asked.

“Hmm. Are his parents alive? Maybe you could retrieve samples of his DNA—hair from his bedroom, perhaps?”

“His parents *are* alive... And I think we’ll find hair or something at his house.”

“Those will be necessary to create a new body, one as close as possible to the original, for his soul to return to. The Grigori’s research institute may be of use in that regard. Cloning might make this possible.”

The president looked uncertain. “Are there any roadblocks?”

“As I see it, there are two challenges: whether his soul will take root in the new body and whether his Sacred Gear will be accepted,” the Demon King answered with a nod. “Those are the main issues. Medicine and magic can help if his soul fails to fully take to the body, although the treatment may last a lifetime, mind you. The second problem is the bigger one. The fallen angels have established a process of transplanting Sacred Gears from one body to another, but I can’t tell you what the adverse effects of moving the Boosted Gear might be. In any event, if you create a new body and retrieve Issei’s soul, you should be able to bring him back into your Familia. I can adjust his Evil

Pieces again if they reject the transfer, so don't worry about that. I'm glad they weren't affected by Samael's curse."

I'd heard about that. Transplanting Sacred Gears was possible. The fallen angel Raynare was one such example, having extracted Asia's Sacred Gear to take it for herself.

But although *possible*, Azazel had also noted that it carried a high risk. Certain abilities could be lost.

If we went through with this, Issei might lose some of his powers and require constant treatment.

"This is all assuming that his Evil Pieces continue to function and his soul and Sacred Gear remain. If any of them are lost, you'll have no options. However, if his soul is with the Sacred Gear... Well, I suppose something like Regulus Nemea is possible. Maybe his soul has taken refuge within the Sacred Gear itself? If he is in the Boosted Gear, he should be able to withstand the dimensional void. For a while, anyway. The current generation of Longinuses is evolving in unique ways. Maybe this is one more example? There's no small amount of luck at play here, too. After all, this is entirely unprecedented."

I, all of us, we...

"Uggggghhhhh! Isseeeeeiiii!" Asia burst into joyful tears.

Akeno, Koneko, and Ravel were likewise bawling their eyes out.

We had found a ray of hope while in the grasp of despair. No, not just a ray—a shining beacon. Yes, if there was any chance that he was still alive, then he most definitely *was* still alive! How could we be certain? Because Issei Hyoudou had already managed so many miracles. He was everyone's Breast Dragon.

And we understood that better than anyone.

The president covered her face with her hands. "Issei, you're alive...", she cried, tears of relief washing down her cheeks. "Yes, there's no way you'd just go and die!"

Ophis was likely with him, too. I suppose that was to be expected, since he was still alive. As Ajuka had said, with how the Longinuses were evolving, an

aberrant situation was entirely possible. Ddraig was likely out there, too. I could think of nothing more reassuring.

Once Ajuka finished inspecting the Evil Pieces, he handed them back to the president. “You should hold on to these, Rias Gremory. Your beloved is the miraculous Breast Dragon. Perhaps his soul will find its own way back with Ophis and the Red Dragon Emperor Ddraig’s support... I will have my people investigate the dimensional void. Falbium’s Familia ought to be of some assistance.”

“...Thank you, Lord Ajuka.”

With that, Ajuka Beelzebub stood. “Well. It’s time for me to command my Familia to subdue some of those giant, rampaging anti-monsters. I’d better prepare a few countermeasures of one kind or another. However, the ones making the final calls will be the up-and-coming demon youths—that includes you all—and Sirzechs’s people. Remember, the underworld will soon belong to you.” He paused to extend a hand and form a teleportation array. “You should go. The underworld needs young strength. Don’t you worry. Knowing him, I’m sure he’ll be back. You all should know that better than I. That’s the sort of demon he is.”

Ajuka Beelzebub was absolutely right.

If Issei was alive, then he’d return to us. He’d find his way home no matter what.

We all believed that completely.

We’re waiting for you, Issei. So get back soon.

The underworld, the children of the underworld, are all waiting for you!

Dimensional Void

Huh? Was I sleeping?

I—Issei Hyoudou—opened my eyes to find myself lying atop red earth.

I'd just had such a strange dream. I remembered aiding Kiba in a fight against Siegfried. When the odds were against him, I gave him Ascalon...or so I thought. The others hadn't looked all that great, so I'd done my best to offer them a little encouragement!

Hold on. Where am I?

Glancing around, all I could see were rugged red...rocks? Was this a wasteland?

I couldn't be entirely sure, but the earth was certainly red. Above, the sky was filled with a kaleidoscopic mix of variegated colors.

Wait... Is this hell? Last I remembered, I was chasing after that bastard Shalba to rescue Ophis, and then...

Then what? I tried heading home, but... I mean, I beat Shalba... And then? Huh? He got me, too? My memories were a blur.

"So you're awake. It was touch and go there for a while," sounded my partner's voice.

Ddraig? Ah, I blacked out... Huh? This is weird. My body, I mean.

Something about me was...strange. I had no tactile sensations! It didn't feel like I was touching *anything*! I was wearing my armor, but I couldn't feel it one little bit! What was going on here?!

I tried retracting my helmet's mask...but it didn't work! Th-then how about this?

I dispelled the armor around my hands, only to discover...

Th-they're gone?!

Why aren't they beneath my armor?! H-hold on... Don't tell me it's the same for my entire body...?

While I was struggling to fathom what was going on, Ddraig spoke up. *"Samael's curse destroyed your body. Your soul is currently inhabiting your armor. This is a dangerous spot for you, that's for sure."*

Huh? My body...was gone? I'd been reduced to just a soul? And now it was housed inside my armor?

I realized at once what this meant.

You're saying I won't be able to sleep with Rias?! Arrrrrggggghhhhh! I screamed, clutching my head in my hands.

How could this be?! I wouldn't be able to touch breasts anymore?! Rias's breasts, Akeno's breasts, and Asia's growing breasts, too! This had to be a joke! I couldn't touch them anymore?! Nggggghhhhh!

I'd just kicked off my relationship with Rias in earnest. Did this mean we couldn't move on to the real thing?!

"Huh? Th-that's what bothers you...?" Ddraig muttered with consternation.

Of course! I told my partner. This is life-and-death! I've finally hit it off with Rias, but without a body, how are we supposed to go all the way?! Her boobs—I won't be able to touch them with my bare hands. I won't be able to grope them! I'd rather be dead! Nggggghhhhh! You're telling me we're supposed to sleep together with me just as my armor?! How's that even supposed to work?! I'm not some dullahan! I can't pull that off!

And it wasn't just Rias. What about Akeno's tits?! And Asia's?! And Koneko's, too, one day in the future?! I'd only be able to watch over them from a distance, unable to have them for myself?! I couldn't think of a worse fate!

Was I supposed to let them enter my armor? "Oh, Issei, you're so cold to the touch..." Blech! No, no, no! I wanted to feel them all skin on skin!

You're telling me I can't make a kid with Xenovia?! Damn it! I wanted to have

one with Irina, too...! I'm only good for armor play now?! Dammit, dammit, dammit! Can I at least feel their breasts through the armor?!

"Er, um...partner?" Ddraig began, stupefied by my reaction.

Nggggghhhhh! I had lost my body! I was in a state of shock!

Was he seriously going to tell me there was more?

What is it, Ddraig?! I'm wallowing in despair here! Whatever it is, save it for later! Arrrrrggggghhhhh! I was supposed to kick that fake Demon King's ass and head home... Oh, speaking of, where's Ophis? I stayed on behind to save her, right?

Yes, right. Ophis. My memory was coming back to me. I saved her and then fell to Samael's poison on the way home. When I came to, I was lying on some red dirt, and my body was gone...

I spun around, searching wildly for Ophis, when...

"Nnh, nnh, nnh."

Ah, there she was. Pounding at the red earth with her hands.

"H-hey. What are you doing?" I called out as I approached.

"The Great Red. I will defeat him."

Eh? Wh-what's she...?

Only then did I realize where we were!

I'd thought this was a rocky desert or something...

I ran about as fast as I could. The place wasn't all that vast, and it wasn't long before I reached the end... There was some kind of huge protrusion! A horn!

I ran a little farther, and that's when...

...I came upon a huge head! I stood atop a familiar creature.

Yep, we were on the back of a huge dragon—the Great Red!

Whooooaaaaa?! Was I really on top of the Great Red?!

Wh-why are we on the Great Red, Ddraig? I asked.



My partner sighed. *“After defeating Shalba Beelzebub, you collapsed in that artificial dimension, which quickly collapsed into nothing. The Great Red just happened to be passing by, so Ophis brought you here. We’re in the dimensional void. It’s already been a few days.”*

So that’s what happened...

By chance, we’d happened on the Great Red... Talk about lucky. So this was the dimensional void? It was a pretty creepy place, honestly.

Hold on, a few days had passed?! E-everyone was probably super worried!

“You’re always attracting people to you, so you must have drawn the Great Red as well... Still, you’ve been bumping into far too many legendary beings lately. It isn’t normal. There’s no making heads or tails of you. Honestly, pulling others in to escape a crisis...”

I wished Ddraig wouldn’t talk like that. Did he think I wasn’t bothered by all this?

I just wanted to live in raunchy, erotic peace! Why did I keep getting dragged into these things?! It had already reached an incredibly dangerous level. I’d lost my body!

Maybe I needed a good old exorcism? Ah, but I was a demon—an exorcism would deal immense damage! What was I supposed to do?!

Well, panicking wouldn’t get me anywhere. Whatever the reason, we’d all been saved thanks to the Great Red passing through.

Ophis stopped hitting the Great Red for a moment, glancing up at the kaleidoscopic sky.

“What are you doing here? Why didn’t you return to your original world?” I asked her.

It wouldn’t have been all that surprising if she’d left me behind.

“This is my original world,” she answered.

Oh, right. She hailed from the dimensional void.

“But you didn’t leave for the underworld, or even the human world? Why

not?”

“Ddraig said we would go back together. So I waited here. We’ll go together.”

How faithful she was, this Dragon God. She wasn’t a bad person at all. She was pure of heart, even.

You’re pretty weird, you know that? But you’re a good sort of weird... Ah... Hold on, can we go home? Teach didn’t try summoning us back or anything? I asked.

“He did. But only your Evil Pieces made it through. That was an unusual sight. They’re filled with mystery, those demonic Evil Pieces,” Ddraig said.

They tried summoning me, but only the pieces went back?!

Seriously?! Ah, looks like you’re right. I can’t feel my pieces responding at all!

Now, this was a bummer... Seriously? So even though my soul survived, my body was gone, and so were my Evil Pieces...? And all I had left were my soul, my Sacred Gear, and Ddraig?

Honestly, it was incredible that I was even alive at this point. Seriously, this was unbelievably good luck... W-was this thanks to the Breast God’s divine protection?

“Your strength came from the Evil Pieces, didn’t it, partner?”

Ever on the mark, that Ddraig. My Triaina ability and True Queen mode were possible only because of my Evil Pieces. With them, I’d unlocked new powers never achieved by previous Red Dragon Emperors.

We need to let everyone know I’m okay... Well, maybe not okay... A-anyway, we’ve gotta tell them I’m still alive. H-hold on. Am I going to be all right?

I was basically an empty suit of armor... Was I really alive? Like, technically? I was conscious, at the very least...

“You’re drawing on the Great Red’s power. You should be fine for the time being,” Ddraig answered.

S-so I couldn’t leave the Great Red?!

That means I can’t go home, right?! I’m totally done for...

"Can we return to the previous subject, partner?" Ddraig asked.

Huh? Which subject?

"Confirming our present situation."

The situation. Right... Basically, we're on a trip with the Great Red through the dimensional void forever. Yeah? A world without any boobs, butts, or thighs. And it's for eternity... This is hell! My dream of becoming a harem king has never felt so distant!

Ddraig laughed out loud. *"Ha-ha-ha-ha! So you still haven't given up on that? Way to go, partner!"*

He needed to knock it off! This was no laughing matter! I was deadly serious!

That was my dream! But how was I supposed to pull it off without a body?! No, if worse came to worst, I would just have to think of some erotic stuff I could do as a suit of armor!

"Ah, that's it. I can see why the lingering thoughts of my past hosts left everything in your care."

Hold on. What? I focused my attention inward, into the depths of my Sacred Gear.

There was a white void... Tables and chairs... But no sign of any people.

My predecessors were gone! What on earth?!

"...Partner," Ddraig said solemnly. "Your soul was at risk of being extinguished by Samael's curse. It was already too late for your body, and your soul would have been next. Even I thought you were finished. I had given up. I was ready to be transferred to my next vessel."

Wait a second. How did my soul make it through, then?

"The lingering memories of your predecessors surrendered themselves to protect you from the curse. They let it take them in your place while I pulled you out and moved you into the armor. The timing was perfect. If any of us had been a second too slow, you wouldn't be here now."

...

What...? So I... My predecessors... I was only here because they saved me?

But I had barely spoken to them! They'd given me all kinds of advice back in that artificial dimension! I thought we were going to be buddies from now on! I'd planned to consult with them again when needed!

And now I'd lost them? It was too much!

"I understand how you feel. Can you hear their final words, Issei? They left behind a last message before they left."

I wanted to hear it right away! I had to know their last piece of advice!

A sudden sense of déjà vu came over me... But why?

A foreboding feeling took root inside me, and an image appeared in the jewel on my gauntlet. A recording of my predecessors' final message began to play.

Fixing me with refreshing smiles, one and all, they said: *""Squishy, squishy, ohhhhhhhhh!"*

...

I didn't know what to say. This was precisely what I'd expected. Yep, I knew this was going to happen! How much did all the previous Red Dragon Emperors love that Breast Dragon catchphrase?!

In one corner of the jewel, the White Dragon Emperor gave me a smile.

"Don't forget about butts, Red Dragon Emperor."

Huh?! Tell that to Vali! Arrrrgghhhhh! What?! It's finished?! Seriously?! That's it?! Nooooo! They didn't have any final morsels of advice?!

I held my head in my hands. *Thank you! I'll do my best!* I wished there was more, but that was all! I was definitely grateful, though. They'd saved my life!

What a sorry way to say good-bye! Seriously, they made me so emotional!

I let out a deep breath, trying to pull myself together.

"Look to the left," Ddraig said. "Over there in the distance."

I glanced in the direction...and saw a swollen mass of flesh. Had the Great Red been bitten by a mosquito or something?

It was pulsating! Was there something inside it?

What's that?

"A cocoon. Or maybe you could call it a cultivation chamber."

A cocoon? A cultivation chamber? What's that supposed to mean?

"For your body. A new one is beginning to form using the Great Red's flesh and Ophis's powers."

Say what, now?

While I was stunned, Ddraig let out a hearty chuckle.

"The True Dragon and the Dragon God are reviving you, partner. So why don't we get ready to fight back?"

Satan

The realm of the dead—the netherworld.

I—Azazel—was paying a visit to one of the lower strata of the netherworld, where the souls of the deceased were sent for processing.

This world sat firmly within the Greek pantheon's sphere of influence and was governed by Hades.

It was a wasteland, although not quite as large as the underworld. No living thing could survive here.

An ancient Greek temple came into sight in the distance—Hades's shrine and fortress, where the Greek god's grim reapers dwelled.

That was my destination—mine and several associates'.

No sooner did we enter than the reapers took off in a huge flock, casting hostile gazes our way.

Ours was an unannounced visit. As far as they were concerned, this was tantamount to a surprise attack.

Our reason for coming was simple. We had to tell that bastard Hades that we were onto him and that we wouldn't let him have his way with the underworld.

Seriously, that good-for-nothing schmuck just loved tormenting demons and fallen angels. It wasn't hard to imagine that he was planning to invade the underworld while those massive creatures generated by the Annihilation Maker ran amok.

We were here to question him to ensure he didn't try anything else besides what he'd already done.

We looked to have arrived at a ritual site. The wide space was filled with golden decorations, a striking and luxurious place very much at odds with how

one might imagine the realm of the dead.

The walls were covered with sculptures of the three main ancient Greek gods—Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades.

A skeleton adorned in priest's vestments approached from farther in. Several grim reapers followed Hades. That aura of his was as off-putting as ever.

The grim reapers looked formidable in their own right. Judging by how they carried themselves, they might have been high class, probably even ultimate class... I couldn't help but notice that Pluto, the ultimate-class grim reaper we'd encountered the other day, was conspicuously absent. That was cause for concern...

As soon as Hades made himself known, the man to my right stepped forward. "It's been a while. I, Demon King Sirzechs Lucifer, greet you, Hades, Lord of the Netherworld. Please forgive us for arriving unannounced."

Yep, the first of my associates was none other than Sirzechs.

After returning from the artificial dimension, I'd filled him in about what happened to Ophis and Issei. I wasn't really in a position to ask his forgiveness, but I told him how sorry I was all the same.

He'd simply listened in unflinching silence. Sirzechs didn't blame me for how it had all turned out... But I was ready for him to strike me square in the face, given what had happened to Rias and Issei. After all, I'd screwed up royally.

Yet after instructing his subordinates to prepare countermeasures against the huge anti-monsters and the old Demon King regime, both of which were rampaging throughout the underworld, he'd said, *"I'm going to the netherworld. I want you to come with me, Azazel."*

He'd already deduced that Hades would use this turmoil to make his move.

But how would we get Hades to listen when he was never of a mind to lend anyone an ear?

The answer was to have a Demon King call on him in person.

Incidentally, I'd just received an update on Issei, which I naturally shared with Sirzechs. Unsurprisingly, he was beyond relieved. He must have been seriously

worried.

Basically, since Ophis was with Issei and Ddraig was safe, I felt confident that Issei would find his way back sooner or later. After all, he was the invincible Breast Dragon.

In any event, Sirzechs's people were scouring the dimensional void for him, so it was only a matter of time before we had the kid. The challenge was going to be putting him back together... His soul was one thing, but whether his Sacred Gear would take to a new body was up in the air... I only hoped we could restore him with minimal lasting damage.

Hades, his eyeless sockets gleaming eerily, let out a raspy chuckle. *"For you all to venture here... Kya-ha-ha-ha. Unexpected."*

Despite his comment, he appeared pretty confident. This guy's power was real. He probably understood full well that he could beat me and Sirzechs combined.

Michael had wanted to join us but relented on our advice. After all, it wouldn't be a good idea for an archangel of Heaven to journey down to this lower layer of the netherworld.

Hades fixed his gaze on the figure behind us. *"Who's your angel friend? I sense an abnormal wave of energy from him."*

Behind us stood a young blond-haired, green-eyed man dressed in a priest's clothing, ten wings of pure white sprouted from his back.

The youth bowed his head in greeting. "Hey there. I'm Dulio Gesualdo, the Brave Saints' Joker. I'm here to escort Lords Lucifer and Azazel. It's not like they need it, though. 'Just in case,' Lord Michael said. All part of an angel's job."

He sounded pretty flippant... This Dulio was every bit the weird Joker rumors made him out to be...

Dulio Gesualdo, the vessel of the Zenith Tempest, a Brave Saint in command of the sky...

"Is this Heaven's trump card? The one I've heard so much about? They say the Longinus in you can freely manipulate the weather and elements... Kya-ha-ha-

ha. Good one, Michael, sending your Joker here."

Yep, Dulio posed that much of a threat.

Just in case, I also had the Slash Dog, the user of the Canis Lycaon, on standby as well...

"Kya-ha-ha-ha. The leaders of the bats and the crows and a pair of Longinuses, too... A little much just to bully an old man, no?"

That was rich coming from a guy strong enough to take on all four of us. Evidently, he knew the Slash Dog was waiting outside. I guess I should've expected as much from the ruler of the netherworld.

"A little chat over tea wouldn't be such a bad idea... But dare I ask, what brings you here?"

He knew damn well what! Ugh, this guy never failed to rub me the wrong way!

"There was an incident a few days ago in the underworld, in the Glasya-Labolas territory," Sirzechs answered calmly. "The Khaos Brigade attacked my sister, her Familia, and Azazel at the hotel near the middle-class demon promotion exam venue."

"Ah, yes. I received a report about that."

"The governor and the others tell me they were beset upon by grim reapers."

"And I heard that your sister and Lord Azazel were collaborating with the Ouroboros—Ophis—in secret. I dispatched a team to learn more. Who could stand an act of betrayal while our forces are actively considering an alliance? All the more so when it comes from Governor Azazel, who sings the praises of peace loudest of all. I wanted to know the truth of the esteemed governor, so I had my subordinates investigate—with permission to issue a small warning upon discovery of duplicity," Hades explained, acting all too deferential toward the end.

What a load of bull. To be honest, I wanted to shove a spear of light straight into the bastard's throat.

Screw him! So all that stuff Pluto spouted was meant as a *small warning*?!

Hades didn't send that many grim reapers, let alone a legendary enforcer, for something small!

"However, perhaps I jumped to the wrong conclusion," Hades continued, stroking his fleshless chin. *"If you took casualties, then I apologize. If you seek recompense, name it. I offer anything except my life."*

Curse him for always looking down on us all! He was clearly doing it on purpose, but I had to admit that he was successfully goading me. But I was there, dammit! I could hardly keep my anger under control.

Unfortunately, there was good reason why I couldn't give this old sack of bones a taste of his own medicine.

I sensed an immense pressure emanating from someone else nearby... *Hey, Sirzechs? I know you're playing it cool, but that only makes you all the more terrifying. You normally keep your aura in perfect check, but your demonic energy is clearly raging.*

Sirzechs nodded once Hades concluded his report. "I see. So it was a misunderstanding... Hmm. Just so we're clear, I came here in person because I also heard a certain rumor that I hoped to verify."

Cutting straight to the chase, huh, Sirzechs?

"Lord Hades," he began, "I've been told that you've had secret dealings with the Khaos Brigade—that you've aided the Hero Faction and the followers of the old Demon King regime. You even allowed them to use Samael. If that's true, it would be a most serious betrayal. While we have not always been friends, our pantheons have agreed not to release Samael under any circumstances. I'm not here to question your innocence but to seek confirmation that Samael remains sealed. Please allow us to check."

That bastard Hades would be done for if we got a glimpse at the seal. It would be black if Samael hadn't been released, the sign of a long-secured seal. White would indicate a recent reapplying.

Visual confirmation would give us everything we needed to denounce Hades once and for all.

Yet Hades breathed an exaggerated sigh at this request. *"How uninspired. I'm*

busy. I've no time to deal with your petty suspicions."

Did he really think he could leave with nothing more than that?!

Hey, hey, hey! You're just going to ignore something that could prove your guilt?!

But before I could go after him, Sirzechs raised a hand to hold me back. "I understand. I won't ask any more questions, but know that you are under suspicion, Hades. As such, I have a simple request for you. Until this fuss in the underworld is brought under control, I want you to remain here in this ritual hall with us."

Sirzechs was suggesting that Hades stay put. Basically, if a Demon King kept an eye on the old bag of bones, he wouldn't be able to interfere with the underworld's crisis.

This was our final ploy, though we'd known from the very beginning that it would probably come to this.

I'd suggested placing a barrier over Hade's shrine until the trouble with the giant anti-monsters was done, but Sirzechs insisted on discussions instead.

He was definitely a forbearing one and exceptionally kind to boot, what with his wanting to keep excess damage to a minimum.

Hades came to a stop, glancing over his shoulder. *"An interesting proposal, boy. Very well... How about this? Show me your true form, and I'll consider it."*

...

I was rendered speechless by this insane demand... Was he seriously asking this?

"I've heard the rumors," Hades continued with a gleam in his eyes. *"About why the demon Sirzechs took the title of Lucifer. They say you've deviated from the demon norm."*

...

Silence fell over us. Eventually, Sirzechs nodded. "So be it. If that's the price of having you stay here, then it's a cheap trade. But I suggest you have your attendants fall back... They won't be able to survive this."

“How interesting. Some of my grim reapers are ultimate class, you know. But I surmise you aren’t playing me for a fool.”

The grim reapers surrounding Hades exuded menacing energy in response to Sirzechs.

Meanwhile, Sirzechs removed his jacket, urging Dulio and me to fall back with a sharp glance.

You’re seriously going to do it, Sirzechs?

Dulio and I watched while Sirzechs’s strength increased. His destructive aura engulfed his body as it turned bright red.

The next moment, the entire shrine trembled, undoubtedly due to Sirzechs’s demonic powers... The walls, solid though they were, creaked and buckled, while at the same time, cracks erupted all throughout, running from floor to ceiling.

And that wasn’t isolated to the temple. The whole surrounding area was rocked by an earthquake spawned from Sirzechs’s might...

The potency of that aura was such that everything around him was utterly destroyed without leaving a single speck of dust.

The moment it enveloped him, it seemed to permeate all I could see!

Once the quaking stopped, silence filled its wake. The destructive aura had taken on a humanlike form in the center of the chamber.

That mass of destructive energy turned to Hades. *“In this state, my destructive abilities will spread regardless of my intentions. Without a barrier or defensive field, everything will be returned to the void... It’s a good thing this shrine is so sturdy. Hopefully, it will remain intact.”*

Yes, this cloud of raw annihilation was none other than Sirzechs himself.

Was this his true form?

Seriously? That mass of destructive force had been housed within a single person? It was hard to accept, but I could feel it. My skin was tingling! And the immensity of that aura... This outstripped the previous Demon King Lucifer by at least ten times!

A while back, at the Gremory residence, the family head—Sirzech's father—said to me, "Governor Azazel. Sometimes I wonder whether it's truly fair to class my son as a demon and not as something else entirely."

"What do you mean?" I had asked him.

"There's no doubt that he's some variation of demon," Sirzechs's father continued, narrowing his eyes. "But how did this mutation come to be? Was it due to my bloodline? That of the Bael's? I don't know... But one thing is certain. Sirzechs and Ajuka are the only truly transcendent individuals among the current generation of demons. You might even say they were both destined to become Demon Kings. One struggles to think of any other position that would suit their unique talents. Sirzechs would simply be too powerful for anything else."

Now I could see what he meant. It was little wonder that Sirzechs had proven so effective in the war against the old Demon Kings.

When you had that much power at your disposal, it was only natural that you'd overturn the status quo. And that went for Ajuka, too. A pair of demons possessed of unfathomable potential; of course their side emerged victorious during the war.

However, I could think of one other demon you could probably call *transcendent*, even if he had secluded himself somewhere... That guy would be in for a headache if he decided to show his face.

"Ha-ha-ha. Looks like you've no need for a bodyguard!" Dulio said with a laugh.

I certainly couldn't blame him for thinking that way.

"Are you satisfied now, Lord Hades?" Sirzechs asked.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha," Hades answered with an undaunted chuckle. "*You monster. Yes, you far surpass the old Lucifer. You outclass the entire rank of Demon King, even. With that power, one wonders if you're truly a demon... What are you?*"

"*I wish I knew. A mutant, no doubt... Either way, in my present state, I could annihilate you.*"

“Kya-ha-ha-ha. That doesn’t sound like a joke. Should the two of us fight in earnest, the entire netherworld would be obliterated.”

Yep, I couldn’t imagine this version of Sirzechs giving some half-baked quip. What a happy miscalculation on my part. I’d been prepared to go all out to stop Hades if things got ugly, but now I could rest assured that Sirzechs could handle him alone.

Seriously, Issei and Rias, your dear brother is insane!

A grim reaper approached Hades from the sidelines to whisper something in his ear.

After hearing the report, Hades waved his hand toward the fire in the center of the ritual hall.

An image appeared within the flickering blaze, showing a certain group rampaging against a horde of grim reapers.

“Hey, hey, hey! Let’s see how much of this you can take, you damn reapers!”

It was Bikou, wielding his Nyoibou.

Beside him, a huge golem—Gogmagog—was tearing through a swath of reapers all at once. The next moment, one of his arms warped, morphing into a machine gun that looked to have been designed for the express purpose of slaying anti-monsters.

As the gun spewed fire, Le Fay and Kuroka unleashed a barrage of magical attacks. Arthur’s Holy King Sword cleaved through the air, eliminating hundreds of grim reapers, while Fenrir tore through others at lightning speed.

It was Team Vali.

It looked like they’d showed up in the netherworld and were waging battle against the grim reapers.

Yep, I’d expected this might happen. There was no way they were going to lie low after getting their asses kicked. They wanted revenge against Cao Cao, the old Demon King regime, or Hades.

In its own way, this was good timing. I hadn’t coordinated any of this with them, but still, this was great work on Team Vali’s part. Given that Fenrir’s fangs

were strong enough to slay gods, the group was the perfect opponent for the likes of Hades.

At first glance, I didn't spot Vali anywhere... No doubt he was up to something out of sight.

"Is this your doing, crow?" Hades growled.

I'd been waiting for this reaction. Unable to control myself, my face had twisted into a wide grin.

"Who knows?" I answered casually.

"...!"

Hades's aura flared in anger.

He looked mighty furious. That sack of bones would regret underestimating Team Vali. That band of misfits has already fended off attacks from all manner of enemies.

"You won't be able to take down the White Dragon Emperor without mobilizing all your grim reapers. And if you don't command them personally, you'll be done for."

This would surely keep Hades from interfering in the underworld for a while. He wouldn't have the luxury of launching attacks afar while Team Vali rampaged in his house. Not to mention that Sirzechs was ready for anything, too.

"Indeed," Sirzechs agreed. *"Your only option is to remain here."* While his presence dominated the room, he raised a finger in the air. *"But there's one more thing. It's a private matter, but it needs to be said."* This personification of raw power and destruction fixed Hades in his sharp gaze. The hostility behind those eyes was strong enough to freeze pretty much anyone in place. *"Hades, Lord of the Netherworld. Your actions against my sister Rias and my future brother-in-law Issei Hyoudou are deserving of death. When the hour comes, be ready. I won't hesitate to erase you."*

If Hades had made a critical mistake, it was surely stoking the fury of this man.

Strike that—he'd made two major blunders.

“Hey, you old pile of bones,” I called, conjuring a spear of light in one hand. “You’d better not forget me, either. Here’s another personal grudge for you: Don’t you dare make my students cry, got it?”

Hades wasn’t the least bit perturbed by our threats.

All right. Our job is done here. The rest is up to the young demons. It’s time to come home, Issei. You’re not about to let everyone else steal the spotlight, are you?

Life.-1

The Young Demon Alliance!

We members of the Gremory Familia returned to the Gremory estate after our business with Ajuka Beelzebub. We tried to put everything else out of our minds while preparing to deploy for the capital.

Xenovia and Irina joined up with us soon after we arrived.

“Sorry we’re late,” Xenovia greeted.

She and Irina were dressed in their usual combat outfits. Xenovia carried a long object wrapped in cloth. The fabric was covered in demonic and angelic letters, which could mean only one thing. The Ex-Durendal had been restored.

Irina likewise carried a new sword at her waist... Even from a distance, I sensed its strange and powerful aura. In all likelihood, this was the result of one of those experiments that Azazel had told us the forces of Heaven were conducting.

“Prez? Where’s Issei?” Xenovia asked. “We heard most of what happened from the servants, but what did Demon King Beelzebub say?”

“Yes, well, the worst hasn’t happened yet... Apparently, he has Ophis and Ddraig with him. I wish we could reach out to him somehow, though...”

“Yeah, I get what you mean. But you know Issei. I’m sure he’ll be back sooner or later. He’s probably fantasizing about your breasts, and the vice president’s, too.”

Xenovia was confident that Issei would return. And yearning after breasts... Yeah, I couldn’t deny that was probable.

“What are we going to do now?” Irina inquired.

The president turned to a large television screen set up in a corner of the room. The live feed on the screen showed anti-monsters rampaging through

the underworld.

Given how much time had passed, it wouldn't be surprising to hear some of the behemoths had reached their targets. However, that's not what the scene on the TV suggested. It showed bands of demons and other allies confronting the Bandersnatches.

"Would you look at that?! The counter technique devised by Demon King Ajuka Beelzebub and his Familia is working! Look at the incredible attack radius of the magic circle! It's affecting the Bandersnatch!" The reporter couldn't hide their joy as they observed from above in a helicopter.

Indeed, one of the Bandersnatches appeared to have suffered a critical wound from our forces.

A few hours had passed since Ajuka Beelzebub developed his own strategy to deal with those anti-monsters, and the tide was beginning to turn.

Of course, the anti-monsters were nothing if not durable. Thus, Ajuka Beelzebub and his Familia had shared a powerful new magic technique with the combined forces of demons, fallen angels, and Brave Saints.

"Apparently, Lord Ajuka started working on developing counterstrategies with Falbium Asmodeus the second those things first showed up. He finished his equations while we were with him in the human world," the president said, still watching the screen.

According to the reports we read, Falbium Asmodeus was responsible for devising attack strategies against each Bandersnatch.

And thanks to the combined effort of two Demon Kings, the allied forces had inflicted considerable damage on the anti-monsters stopping them in their tracks.

"Massive Monsters versus Levia-tan!"

Serafall Leviathan appeared on the television screen when the channel was changed. That's right. She'd leaped into the action, unable to sit back while the underworld was in crisis, to engage one of the Bandersnatches.

She and her Familia loosed attack after attack on the creature without end.

Ice magic, Serafall Leviathan's specialty, filled the screen, transforming the wasteland into a world of frost and snow.

Naturally, not even a Bandersnatch could emerge unscathed. More than half its body was swiftly encased in ice... Yes, the scale of that magical attack was simply off the charts. The entire landscape had been consumed by it. So this was what Leviathan was like at her full strength...

On another channel, Tannin and his dragon Familia cornered a different Bandersnatch. Armed with Ajuka and Falbium's technique, their fiery breath incinerated the anti-monster. Tannin's strength alone rivaled a Demon King's.

"Mother! You can do it!"

On yet another channel, a nine-tailed fox doused a Bandersnatch in a mighty flame. It was Yasaka, from Kyoto! And that small figure on her back, dressed in a shrine maiden's outfit... Was that Kunou? She led a whole host of *youkai* into battle.

It looked like the *youkai* of Kyoto had answered the underworld's call for aid. If Issei were here, he would've been delighted by this turn of events.

According to reports, the forces of the old Demon King regime that had sought to take advantage of the chaos to launch an incursion were also being repelled.

"Ah! At last! One of the Bandersnatches has stopped moving!" a reporter exclaimed.

The first group to have successfully defeated one of those gargantuan anti-monsters was Emperor Belial's! A humanoid Bandersnatch lay sprawled on the ground, motionless. Its massive body had been absolutely devastated. Nothing suggested it would ever stand again.

A triumphant cry came through the speakers.

Now that we had taken the advantage, the remaining Bandersnatches would likely fall in less than half a day.

The problem was...

"The issue is the Jabberwocky heading to the Demon Kings' territory," came a

familiar voice from behind.

Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted our Valkyrie Rook, Rossweisse!

“Rossweisse!”

“I’m back, Rias.”

She’d finally returned from the Norse territories!

“I heard about Issei,” Rossweisse said with a stern look. “Knowing how badly he desires your and Akeno’s breasts, I’m sure he’ll return soon.”

Did you hear that, Issei?! Rossweisse said basically the same thing as Xenovia! Maybe all the girls in the Familia have reached the same conclusion. Heck, I have, too!

At any rate, once Issei and Gasper got here, the Gremory Familia would be back to full strength. I’d thought that dream was out of reach for a while, but not anymore.

We’d be united again! There was no way the Gremory Familia could fall apart so easily! We’d pulled through so many deadly trials, and I was confident that would never change!

Now that the Familia—no, the Occult Research Club—was reassembling, everyone’s confidence rose.

“We’re in trouble, everyone!” Ravel exclaimed as she rushed into the room. She’d only stepped out to get tea for everyone a short while ago. “The Sitri group...” Ravel’s expression turned grave. “They were helping civilians evacuate...but they’ve gotten into a fight with the Khaos Brigade!”

That was the Gremory Familia’s signal to move out.

-○○●○-

Lilith—the capital of the underworld (at least the demon portion).

Its total area was roughly the same as Tokyo’s, and the two were much alike in terms of culture and development. Both were filled with skyscrapers and possessed advanced public transportation systems.

Lilith differed in various ways from the capitals of developed countries in the human world, but the fact remained that it was a modern, urban city.

Presently, it was in the midst of a grave emergency. The gigantic anti-monster, the Jabberwocky, was moving ever closer. If the creature managed to reach its target, it would deal the city a critical, devastating blow.

And if the capital city fell, the whole underworld would inevitably be affected.

At present, the Lucifer Familia—including Grayfia and Sirzechs's other servants—were facing off against the Jabberwocky. They were purportedly the strongest of all demons, and after five minutes of battle, they'd successfully slowed the creature, although they hadn't dealt a decisive blow... Their attacks, replayed continuously on the news, were even more spectacular than Serafall's. The landscape around the Jabberwocky didn't resemble its original state at all.

It was my first time witnessing Grayfia's demonic attacks, and they were unimaginably devastating. Their destructive power erased the terrain itself.

This was the true strength of the mightiest Queen, Demon King Sirzechs Lucifer's wife. I understood why the president constantly marveled at her sister-in-law.

Yet not even Grayfia and the Lucifer Familia could truly stop the Jabberwocky... Just how much resentment had it taken to create this menace...?

Still, the evacuation of the capital was almost complete thanks to their delay tactics, or so we'd heard. Demon youths, including the Sitri Familia, had been dispatched to make sure that no one was left behind. However, Sairaorg Bael was reportedly busy dealing with the old Demon King regime forces that had infiltrated the city.

We, the Gremory Familia and Irina, made our way by transportation circle from the basement of the Gremory estate to the northwest section of the capital.

Ravel remained behind. She had been caught up in the battle in the artificial dimension the other day, but ultimately, she was our guest. We couldn't allow her to get dragged into another fight.

Ravel understood this and accepted staying on the sidelines, although she was deeply disappointed that she couldn't be of any help.

After making the jump through the transportation circle, we found ourselves

on the roof of the tallest skyscraper in the area. We were about to move out to rendezvous with the Sitri Familia when a voice sounded from nearby: “Y-you’re here! Th-thank goodness!”

It was Gasper!

“Someone with the fallen angels told me you’d be coming. I was so lonely waiting for you all!” he said, teary-eyed.

Finally, he was back. Now our only missing member was Issei. Once he was here, the Gremory Familia would be whole again!

“Gasper! I’m looking forward to seeing the results of your training!” the president said.

Gasper, however, turned pale and averted his gaze. “I—I’ll do my best... Huh? Where’s Issei?” He glanced around, trying to find him.

He didn’t know.

“Issei...,” I tried to explain, but...

“Over there!” Koneko pointed.

We turned and spotted a huge black dragon soaring in the distance, dark flames billowing as it rampaged from place to place. It was Saji!

Without wasting another moment, we all spread our wings and took off.

We landed near Saji in his Dragon King form—on a street lined with tall skyscrapers. The whole vicinity was aflame. Nearby buildings and roads were heavily damaged... From above, the entire cityscape seemed to be a sea of fire.

Fortunately, there were no people around, no pedestrians on the sidewalks or cars on the streets. The evacuation looked to be complete.

“Gremory Familia!”

A familiar voice drew our attention. Scanning the ground below, we spied a group of women from the Sitri Familia protecting a bus that had lost a wheel.

...There were children inside.

“What’s the situation?” the president asked Meguri the Sitri Knight.

“Some of those so-called heroes popped out while we were escorting the bus... As soon as they recognized us, they attacked. The bus suffered light damage, so we had no choice but to stop and fight here... The chairwoman, the vice-chairwoman, and Gen have all...” Meguri stopped there, barely able to contain her emotions.

Had something happened to Saji?!

“Look!” Rossweisse pointed to the right.

There, on a sidewalk lined with shops, Saji had been grabbed by the throat. His attacker was Heracles, the hero faction’s resident strongman!

Saji was covered in blood and appeared on the verge of losing consciousness. Nearby, Chairwoman Sona lay wounded on the road, while Vice-Chairwoman Shinra fought Jeanne.

Heracles, evidently bored, tossed Saji away, then stomped his foot down hard on the fallen chairwoman.

“Gah!” Sona screamed.

Treading on a fallen woman? Unforgivable!

“What’s this?” Heracles sneered. “Didn’t you beat Agares in a Rating Game? I expected more from you!”

“Quit joking! You targeted a bus filled with children! The chairwoman and Saji were busy protecting them! They couldn’t go all out in that situation! But you did it on purpose, didn’t you?!” Vice-Chairwoman Shinra spat furiously, tears coursing down her face.

Shinra, who normally kept more composed than even the chairwoman, shouted with indignation. I’d never seen her so outraged.

Heracles targeted a bus filled with children...? How could he use such cowardly tactics to fight Saji and the chairwoman?

The very idea was enough to send me into a rage... If Issei were here, he would have beaten Heracles into oblivion without so much as a second thought.

It looked like Heracles and Jeanne were alone. There was no sign of Cao Cao or Georg. Were they somewhere else?

Jeanne sighed as she pushed back against vice-chairwoman Shinra's attack. "I *did* tell him not to do that, you know? Then again, I didn't stand in his way when he went ahead and did it."

Jeanne summoned countless Holy Swords along the sidewalk, knocking the vice-chairwoman off her footing before lashing out with a fresh attack.

Without hesitating, I ran in to protect her!

I closed the gap in less than a second and blocked Jeanne's blow by drawing Gram.

"Cut it out," I growled in a low voice.

Jeanne pulled back in surprise at the sight of the weapon in my hands. "Gram?! No! Siegfried?!"

"Yep. I beat him. Gram has chosen me as its new master."

I kept Gram and Siegfried's other Demon Swords sheathed at my waist.

After defeating him, all the blades accepted me as their owner. I would never have imagined that I might acquire so many Demon Swords this way. I guess there was no predicting the future of our Familia.

Heracles laughed. "Heh! He must have put in a miserable showing, letting you kick his ass!"

It looked like these heroes didn't have much compassion for their comrades.

"So the leaders of the Hero Faction are falling one after another. We might be snuffed out completely if we keep getting involved with the Gremory Familia," remarked a fresh voice. Georg, the mist wielder, emerged from a deep fog.

Falling one after another? Had that boy with the Annihilation Maker been defeated? Shalba Beelzebub had certainly pushed him over the edge back in the artificial dimension.

"Sorry, Heracles, Jeanne," Georg said. "Vritra's black flames were stronger than I expected. It took a bit to siphon them all off into another dimension. I haven't had to use that kind of spell in a while... Just like the legends say, that blighted Vritra knows how to wield a potent curse."

“Hah! He might be inexperienced, but you still took down a mighty Dragon King!” Heracles praised. “That’s the strength of a Longinus for you, right, Georg?”

Georg had played the central role in Saji’s defeat?

No wonder Saji had fallen. A Longinus user who also excelled with magic was a formidable opponent... Then again, the heroes had attacked a bus full of kids, which served as a distraction.

Wielding Gram in my right hand and a Holy Demon Sword in my left, I directed their offensive auras at Jeanne and Heracles.

They easily dodged my attack, but at the cost of an opening!

I grabbed the nearby vice-chairwoman and bolted for Chairwoman Sona and Saji.

“You’re fast!” Georg exclaimed while conjuring a magic circle before his hand.

I don’t think so! Deactivating my Holy Demon Sword, I issued the order: “Dragon Knights!”

My Dragon Knights appeared around me, and I directed them to ferry Chairwoman Sona, Saji, and Vice-Chairwoman Shinra to safety with the president and the others.

All right! Now all that’s left is to...

At that moment, Georg unleashed a huge sphere of flame!

Fire magic, huh?

Brandishing Gram in both hands, I sliced the oncoming fireball in two! That much was a piece of cake for this weapon! As much as I hated to admit it, Gram outclassed the Demon Swords I could create when it came to overall strength, destructive potential, and keenness of the blade.

“...You’re strong,” Georg breathed, marveling at my maneuver. “Moving to save your friends while facing all three of us... You must be Yuuto Kiba, the one with the Holy Demon Sword ability. You’ve always been in the Red Dragon Emperor’s shadow, but I see Rias Gremory has quite the capable Knight.”

“I guess I should feel honored by the praise. I’m fine keeping to the shadows. Issei is our hero. I’m just Rias Gremory’s sword.”

That was good enough for me. My master, Rias, and best friend, Issei, could take center stage. I was a sword. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Hang in there!” Asia called as she began healing Saji and the chairwoman.

A pale green aura gathered around her—a long-range recovery field. Asia’s gentle nature meant that her power restored friend and foe alike, but she was far from the heroes, so there was little cause for worry.

Even if they tried to attack, our friends would step in to defend her.

“One of the kids...was clutching an action figure...of the Breast Dragon... If I’d let them get hurt...I’d never be able to catch up to him...,” whispered a barely conscious Saji. Bitter tears stained his face.

Saji! That was enough to push you over the edge?

“We’ll take care of them, Tsubaki. Can you get the children on the bus to safety?” the president said to Shinra.

“But...,” the vice-chairwoman objected, glancing among us, our foes, and the children.

“Please, Vice-Chairwoman,” I began. “We’ll pay them back for everything they’ve done. We feel the same way as you and Saji.”

We wanted to protect the underworld just like Saji and the others. And we’d never forgive the Hero Faction. This ended here.

“Kiba... I understand,” Vice-Chairwoman Shinra replied.

Good. The children would be safe now. All that remained was to beat these guys.

“Kiba’s using his pretty-boy powers on the vice-chairwoman! It looks like Issei’s not the only one trying to seduce people!” Irina exclaimed excitedly.

...I had to let that slide for now.

“Let’s do it, then.” Xenovia stepped forward. “Durendal has been reforged, so I’d better put it to good use. Time to go wild.”

With that, she removed the weapon from its wrappings. It appeared no different from the Ex-Durendal destroyed by Cao Cao. However, the Excalibur Ruler had been added. The blade's power was unmistakably altered.

A highly compressed, dense aura quietly enveloped the sword.

It had become a hybrid blade, combining the true Excalibur, the sum of all seven Excaliburs, with Durendal. Its might was undoubtedly off the charts.

"I picked up a little something, too!" Irina drew the sword at her hip.

It can't be...

I hadn't noticed it until now, but that was definitely a Holy Demon Sword!

Irina broke into a grin at my reaction. "Yep, exactly! You're looking at a prototype mass-produced Holy Demon Sword based on the one the demon leaders gave Heaven after entering into an alliance! This one's been modified so angels can use it, though. It isn't as versatile as your Holy Demon Swords, but it's good enough for an angel to wield!"

Heaven really developed such technology?

Given the nature of Holy Demon Swords, born from an understanding of the biblical God's death, they would have to be used away from Heaven and the Vatican headquarters. All the same, this was a reassuring development.

I kind of felt like a parent watching their child set off into the wider world. At any rate, my Holy Demon Swords were proving to be of benefit to the alliance.

Xenovia pointed the tip of her blade straight at Jeanne. "I was gonna take revenge on Siegfried, but if Kiba and the prez have already done him in, then I'll just have to help Irina get payback on you instead."

"That's right!" Irina nodded. "I owe you for what happened in Kyoto! You might have inherited the soul of a saint, but you're no good!" Following Xenovia's example, she also leveled her blade at Jeanne.

These two made a good team, that was for sure.

"Oh dear. Then should I join the fray as well? She probably has some of *that*, so an extra pair of hands won't hurt."

It looked like Akeno would be fighting Jeanne as well. By “some of that,” she was likely referring to Chaos Drive. None of us could say precisely how it would boost her abilities, but it certainly made sense to go after her as a team.

The bracelets on Akeno’s wrists burst with gold light, and six fallen angel wings bloomed from her back. This was her fallen angel transformation.

For now, Akeno needed the assistance of the bracelets, but eventually, she’d be able to perform the transformation without them. She must have set her mind on fully awakening her latent abilities.

Jeanne broke into a wry grin at her trio of challengers. “Three against one, huh? And you already know about our latest secret? Interesting! Balance Break!”

With those words, a dragon composed of countless Holy Swords emerged behind Jeanne.

This was the variant-type balance breaker of her Blade Blacksmith. Time had done little to dull its intense pressure. None of her challengers could afford to let down their guard.

“Ex-Durendal now has the abilities of all seven Excaliburs,” Xenovia said, adopting a fighting stance. “All I’ve gotta do is master them to make myself even stronger.”

Precisely. Each Excalibur carried a unique ability. If she could actively employ all of them, she’d likely be able to hold her own against the likes of Cao Cao.

So I thought, and yet...

“Unfortunately, I’m not the most clever,” Xenovia admitted. “I might have more techniques, but that doesn’t mean I can use them properly yet. So I’ll be using *this* instead.”

With that, she gave Ex-Durendal a light swing, triggering a massive explosion that tore a huge crater in the ground.

“The destructive power of the Excaliburs and Durendal are more than enough.”

What a threat, and it was backed by incredible force!

Hey, Xenovia? Since you're a Knight, maybe you should focus a bit more on mastering those techniques... If you put your mind to it, you might even outperform me...

Realizing that I was watching her, Xenovia broke into a dissatisfied frown. "What, Kiba? You think I'm all brawn and no brains, right? But from where I'm standing, you're more than enough when it comes to fancy tricks. So I'll just focus on boosting my destructive potential!"

Please, try to give the techniques at least a little attention! Our Familia is made up almost entirely of power-type fighters! The team will be unbalanced if I'm the only one focusing on technical stuff! Seriously, the situation was getting out of hand! We'd have trouble with future Rating Games if nothing changed!

There was nothing for it. I'd have to ask the president to get us another technical fighter when we had the chance.

"You're the hardest worker here, Yuuto."

Thank you, Koneko! I'll try to hold out a little longer!

"Come, then! A demon, an angel, and a fallen angel! Looks like I'm the center of attention!" Jeanne beamed with excitement as she leaped onto the back of the Holy Sword dragon.

With its master mounted on its back, the dragon dug its claws into a nearby skyscraper to scale the building at high speed.

Xenovia, Irina, and Akeno each spread their wings, taking off after it. In no time, a fierce contest of abilities erupted overhead!

Those three could probably hold their own against Jeanne, which left Heracles and Georg.

"Why did you attack the bus?" I demanded of Georg. "What are you even doing here in Lilith?"

I just couldn't understand. What did they gain by endangering kids? It was unthinkable to me that someone would go out of their way to target that one bus. And what was the Hero Faction doing in the capital? Maybe these guys hoped to loot the place after everyone evacuated. That didn't sound much like

them, though...

“I’ll answer your second question first...,” Georg said. “We’re here to observe. Cao Cao wanted to see for himself just how much damage that huge anti-monster could inflict.”

They were here to watch, or rather, they were accompanying Cao Cao, who wanted to observe the Jabberwocky... But Cao Cao was nowhere to be seen. Was he spectating from one of the skyscrapers? That man never failed to give me the creeps.

“So why did you attack the bus?” I asked again.

Georg let out a deep sigh. “We simply came upon the bus by chance. And as it happened, Genshiro Saji’s Vritra and the Sitri Familia were aboard. They recognized us just as quickly as we recognized them. And before we knew it, we were fighting.”

Was it all just a coincidence? An unfortunate encounter?

Heracles grinned defiantly. “I did fan the flames a bit. Yeah, we bumped into Vritra. But I was getting bored just watching that anti-monster attack the city. So I said to him: ‘If you don’t want us going after those kids, you’d better put up a good fight!’ That’s how it got started.”

—!

That sounded like he actively instigated the conflict. And Saji had taken it upon himself to protect the children...

My fury was building.

“I heard the Hero Faction was made up of battle-hungry lunatics... But this? You’re no more than a band of villains,” declared a man who appeared between us and our foes.

There stood a gallant lion covered in golden fur, and a man exuding absolute power stood behind the beast.

This man had defeated me, Xenovia, Rossweisse, and Issei using nothing but his physical strength.

“Sairaorg!” the president exclaimed.

Yes, it was time for Sairaorg Bael's entrance.

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I'm not exactly sure when it happened, but I remember Azazel praising his abilities.

"If there's anyone among Rias's generation who can face Issei toe-to-toe in a direct fight, it's that guy."

Sairaorg Bael, the man who'd pushed Issei to the limit and awakened his True Queen ability.

Here he was with the lion Regulus in tow.

Sairaorg instructed Regulus to hold his ground and stepped forward. "I'll go." He began to remove his shirt, revealing his magnificently trained body for all to see.

His figure emitted pure fighting spirit.

"No sooner did I finish mopping up the remnants of the old Demon King regime than I spotted a black dragon—Genshirou Saji—in the distance. I had only seen him in video recordings, but I'd know him anywhere. And it looked like he was in a fierce battle." Sairaorg Bael stared at Heracles.

Heracles met those eyes with a broad grin. "The heir to the House of Bael. I know who you are. Born without your family's powers of destruction, a worthless, talentless excuse of an heir. They say you're good for nothing but fighting with your fists. Ha-ha-ha, I've never heard of such a useless demon!"

Sairaorg's expression didn't change in the slightest, even at the taunt.

Compared to the abuses that he'd suffered during his life, this small insult was nothing.

"And you've inherited the soul of Heracles," he shot back.

"That's right, Mr. Bael."

"Then I'm confused." Sairaorg Bael approached Heracles. "Someone so weak couldn't possibly be a hero."

At this, a vein began to throb on Heracles' forehead. Knowing that man, his pride wouldn't tolerate such an affront.

“Heh. I heard you got yourself into a slugfest with the Red Dragon Emperor. What a joke. Demons are supposed to be all about magic. Your kind are basically raw concentrations of magic power and supernatural phenomena. So what does that make you and your Red Dragon Emperor?”

“ ... ”

No matter how much Heracles tried to goad him, Sairaorg Bael didn't raise so much as an eyebrow.

But Heracles persisted.

“And from what I hear, you've got the Sacred Gear with the Nemean Lion, the one the original Heracles beat. Pretty ironic, huh, you bumping into me? You can't beat me without it, can you?”

“I won't use it,” Sairaorg Bael responded simply.

“Oh?” More veins emerged on Heracles's forehead.

“I don't need my lion for the likes of you. I can't imagine you being any stronger than the Red Dragon Emperor,” Sairaorg Bael stated.

This was enough to send Heracles into guffaws. “Ha-ha-ha! There's nothing my Sacred Gear can't demolish! Even if you've wrapped yourself in fighting spirit! It's nothing compared to my Sacred Gear!”

With that, he leaped into action!

Heracles's hands were shrouded in ominous power as he grabbed Sairaorg by the arms and unleashed a tremendous blast with his Sacred Gear! His attacks caused explosions!

Sairaorg's arms ruptured with a tremendous sound.

While only the top layer of his skin looked injured, he *had* taken damage! Heracles's Sacred Gear wasn't to be underestimated!

However, Sairaorg Bael simply nodded his head. “I see... So that's it?”

Even with his flesh torn and blood seeping, his expression remained unchanged. That was enough to throw Heracles into a frenzy. The aura around his hands surged out of control!

“He-he-he. You want more, huh? How about this, then?!”

Heracles slammed his fists repeatedly into the road, sending large-scale explosions across the ground, completely engulfing Sairaorg Bael!

Smoke, dust, and dirt flooded the area!

The road was left completely destroyed, collapsing into a pit of rubble, atop which Heracles bellowed with laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! See that?! Dead! Blown to pieces! And he couldn’t do a damn thing about it! What’s the point of demons without magic? A few little fighting tricks ain’t enough to save ya! Huh...?”

He stopped there, his face awash with astonishment.

The smoke cleared to reveal Sairaorg standing in the middle of the road as if nothing at had happened.

While he looked to have sustained some minor damage and blood dripped down his skin, Sairaorg Bael was utterly calm.

“So that’s it?”

Seeing that Sairaorg Bael’s fighting spirit hadn’t wavered. Heracles’s face twitched.

“Don’t mock me, you damn demon!” he spat back.

For all his bluster, it was clear that his confidence had taken a hit.

At last, Sairaorg Bael moved forward, slowly making for Heracles.

“I was hoping for more from the man said to have inherited the soul of the ancient Heracles... I must have set my expectations too high.”

Heracles raised his fists, but Sairaorg Bael promptly vanished! He was fast!

He appeared directly before his opponent! A head-on assault! Even I was taken aback by this fighting style!

“My turn.”

Thump!

A dull, heavy sound as Sairaorg Bael’s fist plunged deep into Heracles’s

stomach. The impact passed straight through him, reducing the wall behind to a heap.

“...?!”

First confusion, then agony. The pain surely exceeded what Heracles had expected.

“...!”

Heracles fell to the ground, holding his stomach with his hands as blood spilled from his mouth.

In all likelihood, words failed to describe the agony gripping him. I’d experienced a similar blow myself, so I knew. No one could weather a blow like that.

The damage was obviously severe.

With just a single strike, Sairaorg Bael had completely turned the tables.

Even Rossweisse’s magic had proved ineffective against Heracles, but after a single hit from this powerhouse, the hero folded like a house of cards.

“What’s wrong?” Sairaorg asked, staring down at his opponent. “That was just a normal punch. You mocked the Red Dragon Emperor a minute ago, but he was unfazed by a strike of that level.”

At this, Heracles let out a strained, unsettling laugh and rose to his feet.

“Cut the crap! You damn demon! Ngggghhhhh! You don’t even have any powers! Or a Sacred Gear! You think you can take me down with a few punches?!”

Heracles’s body was aglow; his anger was nearing its breaking point! Within moments, the light surrounding him erupted into countless missile-like protrusions. His Balance Breaker! He’d used the same trick on Rossweisse back in Kyoto. He was preparing to launch a full-body arsenal of tremendous destructive power!

“It ain’t happening! Hrahhhhhhhhhhhh!” he screamed, launching those missiles in every direction.

Sensing danger, we all took evasive action.

Countless projectiles came crashing down on every corner of the city, wreaking massive destruction as they violently demolished buildings and streets!

And one went flying straight for Sairaorg Bael!

“Hmph!”

Thud!

He didn’t even need to dodge the missile, instead striking it with his fist and detonating it. What incredible strength... He brushed it aside without a second thought! Once more, I was left awestruck by the formidable nature of this future prince!

Every last missile directed his way was deflected by a fist. Sairaorg threw them off course and into walls and the ground.

One of the projectiles went hurtling for the children evacuating from the immobilized bus. If that thing hit them...

Thankfully, my fears were unfounded because Rossweisse stepped in to defend them!

She quickly deployed a defensive magic circle, completely blocking the oncoming explosive.

Her shield had broken back in Kyoto, but it was more powerful now!

“...This is a new defensive technique. Since I’m a Rook, I thought I’d better capitalize on my unique qualities. I went and learned the most powerful defensive techniques my homeland had to offer. Apparently, if I use my magic while making full use of my Rook abilities, I can even withstand attacks from offensive Sacred Gears and Balance Breakers. With room to spare. Your attacks won’t work on me anymore, Heracles. I’ll block them ten times over!”

Rossweisse’s trip back to the Norse territories had been for her to improve her unique talents. And by learning strong defensive magic, she’d indeed lifted her defensive level by a considerable margin.

The proof was obvious: Rossweisse had weathered Heracles’s attack with

ease. This only increased her value as a Rook.

You see that, Issei? The Gremory Familia is getting stronger and stronger!

The kids were just as excited as I was.

“You can do it, Mr. Lion!”

“Mr. Lion! Don’t lose, okay?”

They were cheering for Sairaorg.

He regarded the support with surprise. The children undoubtedly recognized him from his fight with Issei during our Rating Game.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Sairaorg exclaimed, and his fighting spirit grew to even greater heights.

“Do you hear that? ‘You can do it,’ they’re cheering. ‘Hang in there.’ Yes, I see. It feels good, doesn’t it, Issei Hyoudou? So this is what it’s like to draw strength from adoring children... There’s no way you can win now, Heracles.”

“Don’t get a big head just ‘cause a bunch of bratty kids are egging you on! You dumb excuse of a demon prince!”

Before Heracles could get any more out, a fistful of fighting spirit slammed straight into his face, sending blood flying as he crashed to his knees.

“What the hell...is up with that punch?”

The more blows he took, the more Heracles weakened. They were just punches, yet they cut deep into his flesh and heart. Into his very soul, in fact.

“If children don’t cheer you on, you have no right to call yourself a hero!” Sairaorg declared with a menacing stare.

Despair settled over Heracles’s face as he realized that he couldn’t win, physically or mentally.

However, Heracles pulled two small objects from his pocket, a vial of Phoenix Tears, and a pistol-shaped syringe!

Chaos Break! Things could get ugly if he used it! No, if Sairaorg Bael equipped his Balance Breaker, he’d probably be able to hold his own. But if those explosions intensified, this entire city section would be leveled!

Plus, he had Phoenix Tears, too! There was no telling how far Chaos Break would push him if he managed to restore himself fully!

“D-damn you!” Heracles spat venomously, bringing the tip of the syringe to his neck, but he hesitated.

Upon noticing the pause, Sairaorg Bael asked, “What’s wrong? Aren’t you going to use it? I’m assuming it will fortify your body. Use it, then, if you want. I don’t mind! If it makes you stronger, then all the better! I’ll still surpass you!”

At that moment, Sairaorg was every part a prince.

Heracles’s face twisted with frustration, bitter tears gathering in his eyes. “Curse yooooouuuuu!” he cried at the top of his lungs. He hurled the Chaos Break and Phoenix Tears to the ground and charged the object of his enmity head-on.

He discarded his Chaos Break! I certainly wasn’t expecting that!

Sairaorg assumed a fighting stance. “You’ve regained your hero’s pride at the last moment... Not bad. Unfortunately...”

With his left fist, Sairaorg crushed Heracles’s oncoming strike. Then he delivered a powerful uppercut brimming with fighting spirit using his free hand.

“This one will end it!”

Sairaorg’s fist slammed hard into Heracles’s gut!

The sound of the impact shook the ground.

Having lost consciousness, Heracles slammed hard on the cracked pavement.

Issei’s words to me after our match against the Bael Familia surfaced in my mind: *“Hey, Kiba. Fighting Sairaorg is really strange. I mean, taking him head-on is crazy. I wouldn’t blame anyone for trying to find a way out. But even knowing that, I couldn’t stop myself. I wound up punching him square in the face. That’s just who he is, you know? I wanted to punch him right between the eyes. There’s no logic in it.”*

It seemed that Sairaorg Bael’s fists were potent enough to revive the pride of heroes brought low.

They made for a magnificent sight.

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With Sairaorg Bael's victory over Heracles and Akeno's team battling Jeanne, the only remaining opponent was Georg.

But of course, there was no telling if or when Cao Cao would make an appearance...

In the distance, powerful lightning blasts and bursts of holy aura raged among the skyscrapers. The battle with Jeanne looked was clearly still ongoing. Undoubtedly, Jeanne had used Chaos Break, or else the contest would have been decided by now—Akeno and the others would have easily won had she kept to her Balance Breaker alone. This might yet take a little longer than I'd anticipated.

With Sairaorg Bael on our side, we were a formidable team. Even if Georg used Chaos Break, we'd still have a good chance of winning.

Georg stared down at the fallen Heracles, breaking into a soft smile. "You're strong. You demon youths are the real thing. Sairaorg Bael and Rias Gremory, leader of the Gremory Familia. I didn't expect you to improve so significantly after our last meeting a few short days ago... At this rate, I'll have to assume that your vampire and *nekomata* are stronger than our data indicates," he said, facing Gasper and Koneko.

Gasper had been off training with the Grigori, but Koneko hadn't undergone any noticeable improvements since the battle in the artificial dimension. However, she did intend to learn more sage arts and *youkai* magic from her sister Kuroka. Given the history between those siblings, that couldn't have been a simple decision for Koneko.

Gasper paled when Georg's eyes fell upon him.

"What is it, Gasper?" the president asked, noticing this change.

The little vampire's expression faltered, and he broke into tears.

What's going on, Gasper?

"I'm sorry, everyone... I—I! I *did* go to the Grigori institute...but I wasn't able to get any stronger!"

—!

Gasper's confession took us all by surprise.

"I wasn't able to help...," he bemoaned. "I *wanted* to get stronger—I really did! But the people at the Grigori said I'd already reached my potential..." Gasper's knees buckled, and he dropped to the ground. "I can't even protect the girls... I'm a disgrace... I'm not worthy to call myself a man of the Gremory Familia!"

Gaspar wept openly, having lost all composure... Had the Grigori truly failed to help him?

Georg sighed at this development. "The late Red Dragon Emperor would be ashamed to see his underclassman like this."

At this, Gaspar lifted his face. "The *late* Red Dragon Emperor...?"

He glanced around—at his surroundings and us. He still didn't know why Issei wasn't with us.

"Where's Issei...? I thought he went to stop that giant monster..."

"Gaspar," the president began. "Issei is—"

Sairaorg shook his head to silence the president, and she pursed her lips tightly.

Did they want to keep him in the dark? Why, Sairaorg Bael?! President?!

Georg smirked, ignorant of the interaction between the two Kings. "I see. You still don't know? The Red Dragon Emperor went to fight the old Demon King regime... No, there's no point trying to cover it up now. He went to fight the Khaos Brigade. And he died. Poisoned by Samael's curse, it seems. None of us were there, so we don't know the exact details. But that's probably what did him in."

The Hero Faction was unaware of Issei's survival, although he only lived on as a spirit in the dimensional void. That made sense, though. Anyone would expect a dragon to die after coming into contact with Samael's poison.

Koneko, Asia, and Rossweisse had apparently realized that the president wished to keep the truth concealed for now. They didn't understand why, of

course, and neither did I...

No, hold on... The dots connected in my mind. Maybe Sairaorg hoped to get Gasper to...

Georg continued, and Gasper fell deeper into despair with each fresh word.

Watching my underclassman succumb to such anguish was unbearable.

“There’s no point brooding over it. Not even Ophis or the White Dragon Emperor Vali could endure Samael’s curse. Of course the Red Dragon Emperor didn’t stand a chance,” Georg said with a grin.

“Issei is...dead?”

A solitary tear ran down Gasper’s cheek. His gaze was unfocused, and his body shook. The shock of losing his dear friend and mentor paralyzed him. He hung his head silently.

The same feeling that had brought us low earlier now overtook poor Gasper. There was a long silence. Eventually, the sight grew too much to bear. Koneko took a step toward Gasper.

However, the little vampire pulled himself up on unsteady legs and raised his head slowly.

His expression remained cold and lifeless...but a chill coursed down my spine.

Opening his tiny mouth, he mumbled a single word, a low, otherworldly curse. “...Die.”

Darkness descended upon our surroundings—the ground, the sky, everything was encased in darkness. All light perished.

Thick shadow oozed from Gasper’s body, filling all around him.

“What...? No...!”

Startled by this sudden turn of events, Georg looked around in a panic.

Darkness, darkness, darkness, darkness... The buildings along the road had vanished as though they’d never been there. Everything was reduced to jet-blackness.

“Has he lost control? Is it a Balance Breaker? No, vampire powers? But it’s

too...too strong!”

Even Rossweisse, who specialized in magic, was flummoxed by what was happening. I’d never seen anything like it, either. It looked to be something different to a regular Balance Breaker.

What was this strange world of darkness?



In the center of that pitch-black domain, a humanoid figure marched toward Georg. Its neck twisted to one side, and its shoulders twitched. The figure's feet dragged as it moved for the stunned mist user.

Crimson eyes let out an eerie glow.

"I will destroy you...! Every last one of you!"

That wasn't Gasper's voice! It was an ominous sound, a curse imbued with hatred!

"I thought news of the Red Dragon Emperor's death might push him to the next level," Sairaorg explained. "I'd hoped it would be the catalyst to make him a man. Going beyond the brink might cause him to unleash powers that even the Grigori had failed to draw out. It's hard to believe that the governor's organization simply failed to awaken his powers."

He was right. It didn't make sense that the Grigori, who excelled at their research, couldn't do anything for Gasper. As Sairaorg said, perhaps Gasper had needed something to awaken his potential, a trigger he hadn't experienced before.

"Rias," Sairaorg furrowed his brow. "It seems the power sleeping inside Gasper Vladi was greater than any of us imagined. He's...a monster of sorts. What sort of boy have you allowed into your Familia?"

"No... I thought Gasper's family, the Vladis, banished him because of the Forbidden Balor View... But could this be the true reason? Did they cast him out because they feared him?" the president's voice trembled.

Gasper, clad in jet-black darkness, extended a hand...

Georg reacted at once, deploying a magic circle. However, it was promptly devoured by shadow.

"...! What are you doing?! That isn't magic! It isn't a Sacred Gear, either! How did you break that array?!"

Georg retreated, taken aback by Gasper's new powers, and tried to attack with more floating magic circles than I could count! A barrage of spells from every elemental type rained down. A direct hit would leave Gasper mortally

wounded, no matter how strong he'd become.

Crimson eyes snapped open throughout that dark realm, each pair casting an unnatural glow.

The volley of magic stopped in its tracks.

The Forbidden Balor View... Gasper had used it to stop Georg's attacks! Making all those eyes appear in the dark... That was something else!

The shadow came for Georg's magic as it had before. Georg paled at the sight, obviously terrified.

Step by step, the raw incarnation of darkness that Gasper had become continued his march for his enemy...

Georg summoned mist around his free hand. That was his Longinus, the Dimension Lost! Was he trying to exorcise Gasper with it?!

He sent fog coiling around Gasper, but it, too, was consumed by the darkness.

"I'll...devour you... Your mist... Your magic... They won't work... I'll devour them all..."

Those words... They didn't come from the Gasper we knew... Were we looking at a completely different being?

Not even a top-tier Longinus could stop him now.

The mist-wielding Georg couldn't even put up a fight!

Gasper had been recruited into the Familia with a mutation piece. I was beginning to understand why.

With these latent powers, he must have ranked highest among all of us when it came to raw potential!

The match against Sairaorg's Familia had changed him. That, plus the shock of Issei's death...resulted in this deep darkness.

Issei.... Maybe Gasper's the manliest of the guys in the Gremory Familia... I mean...this goes way beyond being out of the ordinary.

He wasn't a demon or a dragon. He wasn't even a vampire. I didn't know *what* he was.

Gaspar was something else entirely.

Georg employed every magic technique and mist ability at his disposal, but all failed against Gaspar's shadows and countless eyes.

With his every attack thwarted, Georg tried to conjure a new dimension. That tactic fared no better than his others, though, disintegrating.

The darkness began to writhe, growing and transforming, adopting the shapes of beasts. Some were wolves, others giant birds, and a few were even dragons, but none looked quite right. There was a one-eyed wolf, a huge bird with five wings, a dragon with two gaping maws, and a spider with more than twenty legs... The bizarre creatures encircled Georg.

Was this all Gaspar's doing?

"Ugh! My mist! My magic! They're not working! What *are* you?! What's going on here?"

Georg was overcome with despair. No matter how you looked at it, Gaspar had won this battle. Could you even call this a victory? It felt closer to a one-sided assault by some incomprehensible being. It was just too overwhelming...

"This is Gaspar's true power?" Koneko whispered, able to do little more than watch, stunned.

That was only natural. Her friend was like a completely different person now.

"Ngh... I have to fall back!"

Georg had given up on fighting Gaspar, whose new abilities defied understanding. He opened a transportation array at his feet.

He was about to make a jump!

Yet as the circle's light enveloped him, a black flame twined around him!

What?!

Tracing the flame to its source, I saw Saji sitting upright. He'd regained consciousness during the skirmish.

"I'm not gonna let you get away with it. What you did to my friend... No way!" Saji declared menacingly as he outstretched a hand. The black flame coiled

around Georg and transformed into a giant snake, constricting him.

The fires of the Black Dragon King. Supposedly, if they caught you, you'd remain trapped until you were reduced to ashes.

Georg pulled a vial from his pocket—Phoenix Tears—but the dark flames engulfed that, too.

“Vritra’s...curse?!” Georg breathed, aghast.

It seemed that the curse, thought to have been completely lifted, yet remained. Those strange beasts lunged from the shadows.

And so the powerful mage armed with his top-tier Longinus was quietly consumed by the darkness.

When the shadow cleared, and the city of Lilith returned, Gasper was lying prone on the road.

Georg was nowhere to be seen... Had he been completely devoured by the darkness?

I approached Gasper, peering at his face. He seemed to be asleep. The ominous aura that had taken over was absent. He must have passed out after unleashing all that power.

The president held him close, stroking his hair. “After all that, I need to question his relatives about him. But vampires despise demons... I don’t know if the Vladis will help... The last time I approached them, they politely refused.”

Vampires, huh? They valued hierarchy even more than demons did, and they drew a sharp distinction between their pure-blooded and lesser vampires. Simply put, they didn’t have the same compassion for their friends as those in the Gremory Familia. They’d never give former humans a chance the way the current demon authorities did.

A stratified aristocratic society structured by absolute purity of blood. A clan of immortals. Rulers of the night.

Some of them were quite powerful. For instance, when it came to Daywalkers, those capable of moving in the sunlight, there were very few ways to defeat them. To challenge one was a risk, even for a demon.

“I heard an interesting rumor when I went back to Valhalla,” Rossweisse said. “It was about an old noble vampire who captured a Longinus user. The incident set off all sorts of conflicts and disputes between fellow vampires.”

Was that true? Vampire society was extremely cloistered. Its people refused to negotiate with demons or any other faction. Did the vampires really have a Longinus? The underworld was already in danger, and so many other potential issues were apparently developing behind the scenes.

“Regardless, you should be more careful around magicians from now on,” Chairwoman Sona remarked.

“What do you mean?” the president asked.

“Magicians worship strength and talent.” The chairwoman adjusted her glasses. “The mist-user Georg, whom you just defeated, was one of their best. Your Familia was already famous, but after this? I wouldn’t be surprised if the Council of Mages took an interest in you. Mages—especially summoners—are required to enter into pacts with capable demons. They especially like to call on promising younger ones like us. Well-established demons already have plenty of clients and demand high prices. Thus, magicians go for young demons... You can be sure they’ll reach out to you before long.”

Mages, huh? They sure knew how to be a nuisance. Then again, they’d associated with demons since time immemorial. Would one really seek a pact with us?

Suddenly, we sensed a presence from behind!

“Oh dear, it looks like Heracles lost. And Georg, too? Well this *is* a problem.”

It was Jeanne! She looked exhausted and was covered in wounds. However, she was holding something... A boy?!

“Stop, Jeanne!”

“You coward! Hiding behind a poor child!”

“She got us. I thought all the kids had escaped.”

Xenovia, Irina, and Akeno all wore chagrined looks.

If I had to guess, the three of them had dominated the battle, and Jeanne had

fled to take a child hostage.

We all watched as she raised the top of her holy sword to the boy's neck. I was left at a loss for words. This was despicable.

"That's a dirty move," Sairaorg spat.

Jeanne grinned. "Coming from *you*, a bunch of demons? Well, you do seem like the righteous sort, Bael, prince of lions... Anyway, I'm calling Cao Cao. You're too strong. I gather you won't let me fly off, will you? So I'll be keeping this kid with me until Cao Cao gets here, okay?"

We'd certainly have a problem on our hands if Cao Cao showed up. We were fortunate to have Sairaorg with us, but even then, I wasn't confident that we'd win against that Holy Spear.

"Oh? You're quiet, boy. Too terrified to say anything?" Jeanne said, glancing down at her hostage.

The child looked completely unfazed. He flashed us all a smile. "Nuh-uh. I'm not scared. Because the Breast Dragon is gonna be here soon."

There wasn't so much as a hint of fear in those words, only assurance and belief.

"He-he. Sorry, kid," Jeanne said. "The Breast Dragon is dead, killed by a friend of mine. That's why he isn't here."

The boy's smile would not falter. Why? How could he keep on beaming?

"It's all right. He promised me in my dreams. I was sleeping when the huge monster popped up, and I saw him."

In his dreams? Issei visited him in his dreams?

"He'll be here soon, so I'm not going to cry. He said if we make this sign, he'll definitely come back!" the boy exclaimed cheerfully, using his index finger to trace a shape in the air. "You draw a circle like this and press it in the middle. *Squishy, squishy, ooooooh!* Do this, and he'll come back! Fieler and Turas had the same dream, too! And the kids in the other class! Everyone saw him!"

They all had the same dream?

Meaning they saw Issei?

I was overflowing with questions—but before I could get any of them out, the child looked up to the sky and began to sing a song written for him and the children who so adored him.

“He’s out there in a far-off land... Breast Dragon!”

That was when it happened. A melodious sound echoed over the capital. Glancing up, I saw a dimensional rift open overhead.

A familiar, comforting presence emerged from within.

There could be no doubt about it. The hero of the underworld’s children was back.

Life.0

The Bust Dragon Emperor

"A dream?"

I—Issei Hyoudou—nodded at Ddraig's question.

"Yeah. I had a weird dream while I was sleeping. A bunch of kids were crying. They were terrified of these big, huge monsters. So I said to them: 'You know what? Draw a circle with your fingers, press down in the middle, and say "Squishy, squishy, ooooooh!" Do that, and I'll come for you!'"

Ddraig let out a deep sigh. *"Well, that's something. Especially knowing how much you hated it when they did that."*

"It can't be helped! I had to do *something* to cheer them up! Besides, their faces lit up when I said that. That's the power of breasts!"

Ddraig heaved an even deeper sigh.

C'mon, Ddraig, it was only a dream. They had to cheer up!

"Hahhh. I see... So how's your new body?" he asked.

I'd just emerged from the cocoon after transferring my soul into my new body... It had felt a little disorientating seeing it from the outside. But once the transfer was complete, I recognized it as my own immediately.

It wasn't any different from my old body. I could move my hands, and my sense of touch was identical.

"All right! With these, I'll be able to fondle Rias's and Akeno's breasts no problem!"

I began a quick training exercise, wriggling all ten fingers! Ah, I could already feel them! Rias's rich bounty, Akeno's warm elasticity... Just thinking about them was enough to sate my hunger ten times over!

Okay, so my fingers were good. My armor was equipped. Was anything different compared to my old form?

“In appearance, you’re still human. You should be able to go back to your old life. But without your Evil Pieces, you’re now a dragon in human form. Ophis helped make it, but your flesh was born from the Great Red. You’re basically a real dragon, albeit a bit on the small side.”

In other words, I was like the child of the Great Red!

“You’ve also acquired some of the Ouroboros’s powers. So you should be a little stronger than before... Then again, you were pathetically weak to begin with, so it will only do so much...”

Sorry for being a pushover! I mean, I was just an ordinary high school kid!

“The silver lining is that there’s no telling how you’ll develop now with the powers of the True Dragon and Dragon God. Also, you can leave the Great Red now.”

“Hasn’t my growth already been unpredictable? Because of breast powers or something?”

“That’s true, I suppose... The downside is that without your Evil Pieces, you’ve lost a lot of your abilities. And dragon slayers will pose a greater risk now that you’ve taken in the abilities of Ophis and the Great Red.”

Those sounded like major obstacles. I could always ask Rias for the Evil Pieces back, but I didn’t want to imagine the damage that I would take from a Dragon Slayer...

I couldn’t even find the words to describe the pain those things inflicted... I never wanted to experience it again if I could help it.

Okay. What’s next?

The only things of interest in the dimensional void were those inactive golems—Gogmagogs. They were literally floating through the void.

So how was I supposed to find my way back?

Just as I turned my thoughts to pondering, I picked up a familiar melody.

Huh...? It can't be...

"Look, partner."

I peered into the empty sky. There, in the kaleidoscopic emptiness, was an image—the faces of the children of the underworld, all smiling.

They drew circles with their fingers, poking them in the center, and sang a familiar tune the top of their lungs.

""""He's out there in a far-off land, Waiting for the sun to shine!

When it comes out, he searches far and wide, Till he finds what's on his mind!

Dragon! Dragon! Breast Dragon!

Squeeze 'em! Suck 'em! Breast Dragon!

They come in every shape and size, But he loves big ones most of all!

Breast Dragon! Soar!""""

""""He's down there in that far-off town, Laughing all day long!

'Cause rain or thunder, it won't stop him From touching what he loves!

Dragon! Dragon! Breast Dragon!

Poke 'em! Stroke 'em! Ooooooh!

He's seen so many, he knows for sure He loves big ones most of all!

Breast Dragon! Go!""""

"The Great Red says that he's projecting the thoughts of children all over the underworld overhead."

From all over the underworld? Seriously? They were all calling out for me?

I was so happy! My heart filled with joy! They were calling for me!

"The Great Red controls the world of dreams... Past dreams. Present dreams. Imagined dreams. He's showing us them all. Maybe the Great Red is responding to your dream, your intense desire to return home," Ddraig said.

So he controlled the world of dreams, did he? And this was all because of my wish to make my way home?

“Yeah, but this is real. It has to be. Those kids are singing for me! And their voices have made it all the way here!”

My emotions surged as I listened to their voices and beheld their bright smiles.

“...It’s strange. I always found that song utterly atrocious... But now, it’s empowering... He-he-he. I’m going to have a nervous breakdown for real at this rate...”

“Just go with the flow, Ddraig. This song—it’s heartwarming. I’m in a far-off land, and I’m gonna look for breasts far and wide, rain or shine, ’cause I’m the Breast Dragon! I love ’em! That’s why I have to go home!”

“Yeah, let’s go back, partner... Great Red, can you help us out? Can you get this guy back to his girls?” Ddraig asked.

The Great Red let out a tremendous bellow. The space ahead of us warped, and a fissure ran through the air.

Beyond, a huge cityscape took form... I recognized it immediately. Judging by the color of the sky, it had to be the underworld.

My heart felt at ease. I sensed my buddies, my precious friends, and the woman I loved...

“Ophis,” I said to the figure beside me. “I’m going home.”

“I see. I’m a little...jealous.” She sounded lonely.

There’s no need to feel sad anymore, you know?

I took her hand in mine.

“You’re coming with me.”

Her eyes widened in astonishment.

“We’re friends, right?” I said with a grin. “So come on. Let’s go together.”

The mightiest dragon in existence broke into a soft smile. “Ddraig and I...are friends. I will go with you.”

She gripped my hand back.

Yep, that's good. More than good.

We need to head out. Back to where we belong.

Ophis, the Great Red, and I passed through the fissure and left the dimensional void.

Life.1

A Crimson Promise

With help from the Great Red, I tore through the fissure to escape the dimensional void! And no sooner was I out than I was confronted by what looked like a huge monster!

It was humanoid in form, but it had parts of other creatures mixed in—a dragon, a lion, you name it. And it was even bigger than the Great Red!

That's when I realized this was one of those massive anti-monsters conjured up by the Annihilation Maker in the artificial dimension! It was that bastard Shalba's handiwork!

The city stood in the distance. Undoubtedly, that's what the anti-monster was after.

Shalba's curse, the directive pushing this creature forward, was an order to destroy the underworld.

Admittedly, everything nearby already looked to be in ruins. Massive craters littered the ground, and the mountains, forests, and nearby buildings had all been flattened cruelly. And this wasn't the only creature that Shalba had summoned... Hopefully, the others were already defeated. If not, and they were off wrecking other cities and towns... I had a bad feeling about this.

Damn that Shalba! He really was a bastard—an evil, spiteful Demon King! I was glad I'd beaten the life out of him!

What was I supposed to do about this anti-monster, though? I fell to thought atop the Great Red's back for a bit. And that's when Grayfia showed up surging with tremendous power! I guess she was here with a team to take down the anti-monster!

No way. Is that Sirzechs Lucifer's Familia? It made sense, even if it was hard to

believe. They all had such incredible auras!

Did that mean the samurai-looking guy dressed like a Shinsengumi warrior was Sirzechs's Knight?

Ah, and Enku the kirin was among the group, too!

"That's a lot of power for one team... They're all abnormally strong," Ddraig said with obvious admiration.

I know, right? But unless I was mistaken, it looked like even they were struggling against that huge anti-monster.

No matter how you looked at it, the creature hadn't taken so much as a lick of damage. It didn't look like Sirzechs's Familia was injured, either.

Anyway, the anti-monster had clearly noticed us. All six of its eyeballs were directed our way, and its bearing turned hostile suddenly! Admittedly, the Great Red was pretty massive, so it was only natural that we stood out!

"What? Do you mean it?"

Huh? It sounded like Ddraig was talking to someone. What was going on?

"Oh, the Great Red said he doesn't like the way the anti-monster is glaring at him..."

Had it incurred the wrath of the Dragon God? I suppose the anti-monster did have a nasty look to it. Still, I was a bit surprised by the Great Red's aggressive streak... He was almost like a high school delinquent. Maybe his urge to wander aimlessly through the gap between dimensions was similar to how young rebels wished to blast off on fast motorcycles. Was this guy really a peaceful dragon?

"So there you have it, partner. The Great Red says he'll lend us a hand to take that thing down," Ddraig explained, outlining something preposterous!

Take it down?! That massive anti-monster?! And I was going to be involved?!

How?! If Grayfia and Sirzechs's Familia couldn't so much as scratch it, what good could I do?! Even if I still had my True Queen ability, this was definitely beyond me!

After the middle-class demon promotion exam, Azazel had remarked that my

abilities rivaled a high-class demon's or perhaps went even higher. Yeah, my True Queen ability put me on par with Sairaorg using his Balance Breaker, and not to brag or anything, but I could probably give an ultimate-class opponent a good fight, too.

However, I couldn't possibly take down an anti-monster that was too much for Sirzechs's Familia, the strongest of all demons!

The absurdity of this had me sweating bullets.

"Do not worry," Ophis assured. "Ddraig's body is much the same as the Great Red's. They can merge."

Ddraig? She means me, right? Sometimes even I didn't know which of us was which... Hold on, "merge"?!

Me and...the Great Red? Whaaaaaat?! This new body was grown from part of the Great Red. Was that what Ophis meant? We could combine our powers? How was that even possible?

Was Ophis joking?

The Great Red's body let out a dazzling and divine crimson aura!

All that blinding light! It was turning the whole field a deep, resplendent red!

And it enshrouded my body, too...

Huh? When I opened my eyes, I was face-to-face with a hulking anti-monster!

That red light had fallen over me, and now here I was, staring right at it! Hold on... I stared at it doubtfully for a moment. I'd seen this creature before, but I could have sworn that it was considerably larger...

This was a six-eyed chimera, practically identical to the anti-monster staring down the Great Red...

"Oh, you're awake, partner," came Ddraig's voice.

Yeah, I'm up. Hey, why is there another one of those things? From the looks of it, I'd say this one's about the same size as me. No, maybe a couple of feet taller?

"Well... You got bigger."

I was so taken aback that I couldn't string together a response!

Huh?! Eh?! What?!

I glanced down at my feet and spotted suburban roads and little miniature buildings. There were forests and rivers too, It seemed like a diorama ...

I turned my attention to my body. There was no mistaking my Red Dragon Emperor armor!

Looking over my shoulder, I saw the same underworld city I'd spied from atop the Great Red. S-so I really did get bigger...?

"I—I'm massive?! Whaaaat?!"

My shocked cry boomed over the landscape! Could you blame me for being dumbfounded? I mean, what *was* this?! I was in some supersized Balance Breaker state!

Ah, I spotted Grayfia and the others! They were looking this way! And they were so tiny! At first glance, I thought they were little figurines!

I truly was gigantic!

"Good, you're finally starting to wrap your head around it. The Great Red said he would help out, remember? This is what he meant. You've been remade at his scale. Just like Ophis said, you've merged. And this is the result."

A fused, gargantuan body?! Dammit! Why did this have to happen with a massive dragon?! Why couldn't I have merged with Rias or Akeno?!

"Aaaaauuuuuggggghhhhh!"

The anti-monster let out a huge roar before rushing straight for me! The earth shook beneath its feet, and the landscape trembled with every lumbering step!

Damn! What am I supposed to do here?! Think, Ddraig!

"It's the same as usual. You can move as you always have. The Great Red seems to be leaving motor control to us. Just think of this as a larger body."

That sounded simple enough!

And with that, it was time to get to business! I started by throwing a punch straight for the oncoming monster! With a loud thud, my fist slammed flat into

its face!

The monster staggered back from the blow. I thought it was a good hit, given how much the creature recoiled...but it responded by baring its ferocious, fanged maw, a flicker of flame rising from within!

It was about to spit fire!

“Partner. If those flames reach the urban area behind you, they’ll cause immense destruction. I wouldn’t suggest dodging it.”

I’m not that stupid, Ddraig! But if dodging it is out of the question, then...

I extended my right arm, preparing to launch a Dragon Shot.

This was the perfect chance to show off my new-and-improved abilities!

“Hrauuuuuggggghhhhh!”

A massive sphere of flame came flying from the creature’s mouth! How many casualties would there be if that thing struck the city?! There were children down there! There was no way they’d all get out in time!

“Go!”

“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”

I fired a mass of turbo-charged demonic energy straight at the fireball!

Just before the two projectiles met...

“Turn!”

The Dragon Shot responded to my command, arcing through the air. Its trajectory curved downward just like a forkball!

This was it!

“Now go up!”

I thrust my right hand into the air, and the Dragon Shot shifted upward! I’d modeled this on Sirzechs’s special move! It took hours of practicing to work out how to manipulate my Dragon Shots after hurling them at an enemy.

Now that my Dragon Shot was below the fireball, it started pushing it higher into the air!

Boom!

With a violent crash, the two mighty forces ripped through the sky, the conflagration from the explosion filled everything overhead.

The detonation sent a powerful rush of hot wind coursing down.

Had that hit an urban area, it would have been an utter catastrophe! The whole city would have been reduced to rubble!

The anti-monster let out another roar, rushing me again! But I wasn't worried about the physical collision. I'd taken mightier and more formidable blows in the past!

This was nothing compared to that majestic lion!

"Come on!"

As the monster lunged, I let loose with another punch, throwing the creature backward! Next came a spinning kick to the side of its head! And I was just getting started!

The anti-monster's eyes let out a mysterious light!

"It's going to shoot light from its eyes!" Ddraig exclaimed.

A beam attack? I twisted myself to the side to let it shoot past! Demons were naturally weak to light. Hold on, did I even count as a demon anymore?

Either way, taking a hit was no good, so dodging was the best option!

The beams of light shooting from the creature's six eyes grazed my body as they swept behind me.

Booooooooooom!

The ground shook from a tremendous explosion. Behind me, a huge chasm was gouged into the ground, with pillars of fire spewing out!

This had to be a joke! That attack literally reshaped the terrain! The underworld would be annihilated if this continued!

"I have some good news from the Great Red, partner."

Hurry up and come out with it, then!

“There’s a finishing move. If you use it, you’ll be sure to win.”

Awesome! Just what I needed!

“The problem is this whole area will be eradicated if you use it here... Its destructive power is off the charts.”

Seriously?! If the Red Dragon Emperor said so, then it had to be a genuinely awesome technique. Maybe I can throw the anti-monster up into the air and hit it with the attack there?

“Yeah, that sounds like the only way.”

Okay, now the problem was how. I racked my brain trying to come up with a strategy, and that’s when a small figure entered the corner of my vision.

Oh yeah, she should be able to handle this!

“Grayfia?!” I called out, turning her way. “Can you hear me? It’s me, Issei!”

Heeding my voice, Grayfia soared toward me. “Issei? I knew it was you! I’m glad to see you’re all right.”

“Y-yep! Thank you!”

“Why are you a giant?”

She and the others eyed me with suspicion, but there was no time to explain.

“I can go over everything later, Grayfia. There’s something I need you to do to help me defeat that monster. Will you help?”

Her face turned stern like that of a stalwart warrior... Dang, Rias’s sister-in-law sure was gorgeous.

“Let’s hear it. What should I—what should we—do?”

“I need you to throw that thing up high into the air. If you do, I can let loose with an oversized special attack!”

Grayfia laughed after hearing my less than subtle tactic. “I see, I see. That’s easy enough to follow. I think we can trust an oversized attack coming from you. Very well. This is nothing the Lucifer Familia’s Queen can’t handle!”

After agreeing to my plan, Grayfia took to the air! Her rich and dense aura

was far stronger than any in the Gremory Familia! The air itself vibrated as she soared!

“Souji! Slice off the Jabberwocky’s legs!” she said to the samurai in the Shinsengumi-style jacket.

“Very well, Mistress Grayfia.”

The samurai moved with incredible speed, positioning himself beneath the anti-monster’s feet. I could hardly believe it, but he might have been faster than Kiba...

The samurai—Souji—placed a hand on the hilt of the katana at his hip.

After only an instant, I realized that the anti-monster’s right leg had been sliced clean through the knee.

I didn’t see him remove his sword at all. However, something about his movements struck a chord in my memory. Was he Kiba’s sword master?

While I was busy trying to connect the dots, Grayfia and her fellow Familia members flew up to the anti-monster. A large-scale magic circle formed beneath the creature as it collapsed.

Its dismembered legs were already regenerating! Unsightly tentacles extended from the wounds, trying to reattach themselves to the severed limbs. Talk about fast!

If we didn’t do something, it would be back on its feet in no time!

Grayfia and the others completed their spell, and the array burst into light beneath the anti-monster.

“We’re launching it into the air, Issei!” she called out.

A moment later, the massive anti-monster was indeed cast high up into the sky as though lifted by some astounding, invisible force.

Yes! It worked! Come on, Ddraig, time for that special move!

“On it! Leave it to me!”

No sooner did Ddraig respond than the chest section of my Red Dragon Emperor armor slid open with a loud grating sound to reveal a cannon.

What the...?

"...Longinus Smasher... It's an abominable technique that's supposed to be beyond attaining," Ddraig whispered.

Longinus Smasher. One of my predecessors mentioned something about me using it while in my Juggernaut Drive. Apparently, I'd used it to blow away Shalba in one hit.

Well, whatever! If it helped me beat this anti-monster, then it would do!

Vrrrr-rrrrr-rrrrr!

A quiet vibration sounded while an astounding power gathered in the cannon.

Awesome. The amount of aura was insane compared to my Crimson Blaster! Was this the power of the Great Red?!

High above, the anti-monster had finished regenerating its legs, but my attack was ready!

It glared down at me, readying more beams of light from its eyes and another fireball.

Fortunately, I was faster! There was no way I'd miss that giant airborne target!

"Longinus Smasheeeeerrrrr!"

Boooooooooooooooooooooom!

An extremely thick bombardment of red energy rocketed from my chest!

The anti-monster loosed its fireball and beams, but the Great Red's strength was too immense, flooding the entire sky with its red aura.

...

Once things settled down, I scanned the air, but that anti-monster had vanished without a trace.

Whoa! So this is the power of the Red Dragon God Emperor... I know I've described things like this before, but trust me, it really was incredible!

Whoooooooooosh...

My body began to glow red.

...

By the time I realized what was happening, my surroundings had shifted again!

My perspective was back to normal. The trees and buildings were the right size again! Which could only mean...

...I was back to my normal size!

My body was its proper dimensions again. A huge dragon, the Great Red, soared above me.

He was staring down at me...or maybe at Ddraig?

Something shone in his eyes, and the sky distorted. Apparently, he was opening a dimensional hole.

The distortion widened, opening wide enough for the Great Red to pass through. I could make out the kaleidoscopic colors of the dimensional void past the opening.

With a final look at me, the Great Red opened his mouth. And I heard his voice for the first time.

"Squishy, squishy, ooooooh."

—!

S-seriously?! Even the Great Red's saying it now?! Come on, gimme a break!

He was already passing through the distortion back into the dimensional void! How awful!

"Squishy, squishy, ooooooh," he said again while departing!

Twice in a row?! Those were the only words he offered before vanishing!

H-hey! Y-you can't just fly off on me like that!

"He can't hear you. Neither can I. So there."

Huh?! "So there?!" Since when did you start talking like that, Ddraig?!

"Squishy, squishy, ooooooh." This time the words came from Ophis, who'd

appeared beside me.

“Ngh! Why do you legendary dragons and everyone else like that damn catchphrase so much?!”

I was the one who’d defeated that anti-monster after merging with the Great Red, yet all I could do was cry out pathetically at the Dragon God as he made his departure.

-○○●○-

“This is comfortable.”

I had activated my Balance Breaker, and was flying through the sky with Ophis on my back. She certainly seemed to be enjoying herself up there, dammit.

Grayfia and the others had things under control now that the anti-monster was dealt with, so I decided to make my way to the city.

I’d sensed Rias and the rest of the Familia nearby while riding on the Great Red.

If I wasn’t mistaken, they were all in the city... But there was smoke billowing from all over! And I spotted damaged buildings and roads from my spot in the sky!

There was no sign of any people about. Everyone must have evacuated before the anti-monster’s arrival. That would explain why it was so deserted. But then, why was there so much damage? The anti-monster hadn’t reached the city thanks to Grayfia and her team.

“Maybe the remnants of the old Demon King regime are responsible? Or the Hero Faction?” Ddraig suggested.

Ah yes, that would make sense. In other words, Shalba Beelzebub’s organization. They certainly were the type to try to take advantage of all this chaos.

“West,” Ophis said from my back.

“West?” I repeated.

“The ones called Asia and Irina are over there,” Ophis answered.

She remembered Asia’s and Irina’s auras? Heh. Ophis was pretty handy to

have around!

I spread my dragon wings and headed in the direction she indicated.

After a few minutes, I sensed a familiar group.

Yep, it was them. I was sure of it!

Not much time had passed since I'd last seen them, yet it felt like ages.

Soon I spotted multiple figures amid the smoke and dust. There they were!

Rias! Asia! Akeno! Koneko! Kiba! Xenovia! Irina! Rossweisse! Even Saji and Chairwoman Sona! And Gaspy, although he seemed to be unconscious.

Oh, Sairaorg and that lion, too!

After making sure it was them, I approached from overhead and landed right in the middle of the group! They couldn't possibly fail to notice me.

Finally, I was back!

"Issei Hyoudou has returned!" I announced at the top of my voice.

I had returned at last!

Huh? Hold on. This doesn't make any sense. No "Welcome back"? No "You kept us waiting"? Was my dramatic entrance all for nothing?

I glanced around... Everyone looked utterly stunned... They nearly looked possessed.

I noticed Jeanne was nearby. So this was the Hero Faction's doing! And Heracles was down! Had everyone been fighting?

I couldn't spot Cao Cao... Jeanne, however, stared at me strangely.

"Maybe they don't recognize you?"

Seriously, Ddraig? How can that even be possible? M-maybe I should try saying something to jolt their memories.

I retracted the visor portion of my helmet to reveal my face and flashed everyone a great big smile. "Um... Breasts! I rode back on the Great Red!" I exclaimed.

A moment later...

“Issei!”

“Is that you, Issei?”

“Issei!”

“Issei! I knew you would be back!”

“...Issei!”

“Issei! You made it!”

“Issei! Good heavens!”

“It *is* you, Issei!”

“Hyoudou!”

“Hyoudou, you’re alive?!”

Rias, Asia, Akeno, Kiba, Koneko, Xenovia, Irina, Rossweisse, Chairwoman Sona, and Saji all called out my name in unison.

Hey, hey, hey! Did I really have to bring up breasts for them to recognize me?! They sure didn’t seem to think that much of me!

I couldn’t help but recoil in shock after learning their opinions of me.

Asia, Koneko, and Akeno came racing my way, embracing me.

“Issei! Issei, Issei, Issei, Issei, Issei!”

“Issei... Welcome back.”

“Please... Don’t leave me again... I don’t want to live in a world without you...”

Uh-oh, everyone was in tears...

“Yep. I’m not crying. No man I choose is gonna die that easily.”

“What are you talking about?! You were bawling your eyes out! / don’t mind crying! Bwaaaaa!”

Xenovia and Irina were both teary-eyed. Thank you for worrying about me!

“I knew you were safe. You *do* have a body underneath that armor, right?” Rossweisse asked, both gladdened and surprised by my return.

“Yeah. A lot of stuff happened in the dimensional void, but basically, I got a

new regenerated body.”

Judging by Rossweisse’s words, everyone must have thought I was dead.

I suppose that was natural. Samael’s curse had destroyed my body, after all. On top of that, my Evil Pieces went back to Rias without me. No wonder everyone thought I was gone.

But I was back.

Rias came over, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I’m glad you’re back.” She placed a hand on my cheek.

I could feel her warmth. Ahh. This was the warmth and affection of the woman I loved... How lucky I was to have a new body. I would’ve been heartbroken if I couldn’t touch her!

Hold on! Her breasts were back to their original size, too! I’d worried after seeing how much they deflated because of that boosting technique that restored my strength. Seriously, that was a tremendous relief!

Yep, Rias’s breasts were the perfect size!

“Of course I’m back,” I answered, placing my hand atop hers on my cheek. “I belong with you—with all of you.”

Thump!

Something—no, *someone*—just hit me on the back of the head. Turning around—I came face-to-face with Saji, crying hysterically!

“Nggggghhhhh! You stupid idiot! I... You were dead... And I was gonna...!”

Aw, he was crying so hard that snot was dripping down his nose. I patted him on the head. Sorry, Saji. I was alive the whole time.

“I thought it might be you when the Great Red appeared in the sky... It seems I was right,” Sairaorg remarked. He raised his hand in a friendly greeting.

“Ah!”

Another voice! Turning around, I saw Jeanne completely aghast.

“Sorry. You let your guard down when Issei showed up, so I got the children to safety,” Kiba said. He had a small boy in his arms.

Had something happened? Maybe Jeanne took that kid hostage or something! Whoa! I hadn't even noticed!

"Welcome back, Issei," Kiba said. "Thanks to you, I was able to save this child. That's our hero. I'm glad to see you haven't changed. But I wasn't expecting you to ride in on the Great Red."

His refreshing pretty-boy smile hadn't changed. Honestly, I was glad for it. His positivity undoubtedly helped the Gremory Familia in my absence.



Jeanne, meanwhile, fixed me with a fierce glare. “How did you survive Shalba’s scheme? You’re a terrifying one, Red Dragon Emperor.”

“Thanks... So what now? Are you gonna fight us?”

At this challenge, Jeanne pulled a pistol-like device and a small vial from her pocket. Was she going to shoot me? No, I saw a needle at the end of it. That meant it was a syringe. And Phoenix Tears? Was she trying to heal herself?

“Watch out, Issei! That elixir can power up a Sacred Gear by several levels!” Kiba explained.

Ah, that’s what the syringe was for. I still didn’t know exactly how she’d gotten that thing, but all I needed to understand was that it could make her stronger.

“Using it twice takes a considerable toll on one’s life force, but it looks like I’ve got no other choice.” Jeanne raised the syringe to her neck.

The next moment, she healed her wounds with Phoenix Tears and injected herself. Within seconds, her body began pulsating loudly, and veins formed on her skin as the power radiating from her increased!

I could tell just by observing that this was an incredibly reckless procedure. How on earth was that power-up made?

“Yes!” Jeanne laughed, staggering to her feet. “I can *feel* the strength!”

Countless blades appeared from beneath her feet while she howled at the top of her lungs. Holy Swords! Her Sacred Gear let her produce Holy Swords at will, and her Balance Breaker even let her create dragons out of them!

But she wasn’t doing that this time. Instead, those Holy Swords gathered around her body.

She was covering herself in blades!

A massive snake composed entirely of swords formed before me! Jeanne’s upper body remained exposed, while only her lower half became a serpent’s...

She’d become the Holy Sword version of a lamia!

Xenovia frowned. “That transformation’s a real headache. It increases her

offense, defense, and speed beyond her Balance Breaker.”

It sounded as though they’d already fought Jeanne in this form. Jeanne did mention this was her second time using the power-up.

“He-he-he, I can’t say I like the way it looks, but it does make me that much more formidable. I’ll just have to make a run for it before Cao Cao gets here!” she declared, preparing to escape.

No way was I going to let her get away!

I focused my mental energies and let my fantasies run wild! Yep, I was preparing to use *that* special move! Once the images were ready, I set them free from my brain, entering a mysterious dream space!

All right! I haven’t used this one in a while!

“Boob-Lingual!”

I had Jeanne fixed in my sights! Now it was question time!

“Hey! Jeanne’s breasts! What’s your next move?”

And they answered me!

“Well, you see, I was thinking I could, like, destroy the road and all and escape into the sewers.”

Oh! What a surprise! Her breasts had the voice of a trendy girl! So she planned to flee into the sewers? We’d just see about that!

Jeanne was quick in that new snake body... She summoned up a huge holy sword in an effort to block my path, but I quickly moved around it!

Now for another special move! I just had to keep the mental image in my mind while I attacked from the side! First, I needed to touch her body! Then I could unleash the fantasy!

As you may have guessed, I was picturing her completely nude!

“Dress Break!”

I struck a cool pose as I spoke the ability’s name. The huge serpent-shaped mass of Holy Swords covering Jeanne’s lower body exploded with a powerful metallic crash!

Yep! No woman could withstand this special attack!

And it wasn't just the swords; I'd blown off her clothing, too! This image was going right in my memory for later!

"...You're disgusting."

Koneko wasted no time tossing harsh words my way. Yep, some things never changed!

"Impossible!"

I fired a Dragon Shot at the naked Jeanne...

"You used Ophis's powers...and part of the Great Red's flesh...to regenerate your body?" Rossweisse looked like she could scarcely believe it, even after repeating the highlights of my story.

After defeating Jeanne, I told everyone what had happened to me. They were all surprised, of course, but Rossweisse was especially shocked.

"I always believed you were still alive... But I would never have expected... I mean, it's beyond anything I could have ever imagined..."

Honestly, I'd been pretty astonished, too.

"How terrifying that your power to attract the strong should extend so far. I came here to watch those anti-monsters destroy Lilith, but to think I would witness you show up with the Great Red."

That was a new voice!

I looked over my shoulder and saw...Cao Cao!

There he was, spear in hand as always, watching his fallen allies.

"You've surpassed them all, and in such a short span of time. Your growth is extraordinary, Gremory Familia. Heracles aside, Jeanne ought to have used her Chaos Break... Oh, she did. Twice, by the looks of it, even though that means suffering irreparable harm..."

He didn't seem worried about his comrades so much as he was evaluating their performance and why they'd been defeated. I suppose that was in keeping with his personality.

The atmosphere underwent a sudden change after Cao Cao's appearance. We all knew how great a threat he was.

His gaze shifted to me. It wasn't interest like last time. No, he regarded me as if I were some mutant aberration.

"You've returned, Issei Hyoudou. The old Demon King regime informed me that Shalba Beelzebub poisoned you with an arrow coated in Samael's blood."

"Yeah, he got me. My body was done for. But the Great Red happened to be passing by, and he lent me his power to form a new body... Although my predecessors and Ophis pitched in, too."

The lingering thoughts and memories of the previous Red Dragon Emperors were all gone now. We might have had a weird farewell...but I was grateful for them. It had been a difficult journey, what with my going berserk and later trying to get them all to cooperate, but we had reached an understanding of sorts toward the end.

There was still so much I wanted to ask them.

I'd assumed that bastard Cao Cao would respond with some sarcastic remark, but to my surprise, there was a twinkle in his eye.

"I can't believe it. There was zero chance of you surviving that poison. But you restored your body with the help of the Great Red and made it back here on your own... That encounter was surely more than coincidence!"

He was off talking to himself with an expression of abject disbelief.

In any event, I didn't get the impression that he was about to attack. Just as well. I still had something else that I needed to do.

"Rias," I began, facing her directly. "Please recruit me into your Familia again."

Yep, I still didn't have my Evil Pieces, which meant that I wasn't entirely my old self.

Only once this woman, the object of my affection, gave them back would I be whole.

Rias reached into her pocket, retrieving the pieces—eight crimson Pawns.

As she held them out to me, they let out a brilliant glow, then passed silently into my chest.

Then Rias's lips pressed up against my own. I caught her in an embrace.

Never again would I leave her side. I would stick with her no matter what.

"Stay with me," she said with a soft smile.

A nostalgic warm and crimson feeling reawakened inside me. Yes, I could feel the strength emanating from the pieces pulsating. Now I was complete. I could fight as the Gremory Familia's Pawn once again!

"Yep. I'm yours, Rias. My dream is to be the mightiest of Pawns, remember?" I said.

Yes, I was going to live joyously with this woman—with all my friends!

Filled with renewed vigor, I pounded a fist against my chest. "All right! The pieces are back in place! Way to go!"

I was ready to take on Cao Cao or anyone else.

At that moment, I spotted an eerie wave out of the corner of my eye.

A black haze had risen across the street, and a robed, masked figure emerged from it carrying a scythe!

I recognized him at once. This was the ultimate-class grim reaper who attacked us in the artificial dimension, Pluto!

"It hasn't been long since our last encounter," the grim reaper began.

"Pluto," Cao Cao said with a sigh. "What are you doing here?"

From what I could tell, this seemed like an unexpected visit.

"Orders from Lord Hades," Pluto explained. *"I am to retrieve Ophis, no matter the cost."*

Ophis was standing by my side, and Pluto was staring right at her... Was he, was Hades, after Ophis, too?! Her powers had already been stolen, and she wasn't infinite anymore! Just how obsessed were these people?!

"I'll deal with you, Pluto, the greatest of all grim reapers."

Another voice?! Just how many people are going to butt in?!

This one was familiar, though! How could I possibly forget it! Few people were as battle-obsessed as he was!

A man in a suit of white armor settled down between Cao Cao and me on wings of brilliant light.

“I knew you’d be back, Issei Hyoudou.”

“Vali!”

Yep, it was Vali! Why did all these people who wanted to fight me have to keep showing up?!

Did they all think my return was a good opportunity to reintroduce themselves?! It was enough to make my head spin!

“I’ve been waiting to exact my anger on someone after what happened at that hotel in the artificial dimension,” Vali said to Pluto. “I was torn on whether I should go after Hades or that band of heroes. But I’ve left Hades to Azazel, Bikou, and the others. I decided to wait for Cao Cao to show up, but the Gremory Familia beat me to the punch. Which leaves only you, Pluto. I need to vent this fury on *someone*.”

Vali’s voice was as fearless as ever, but I could sense a hint of anger beneath the surface.

He had to be *really* pissed off to let that show...

Pluto spun his scythe around, readying himself. *“I received word before my arrival that you sent Fenrir after Lord Hades. Those god-slaying fangs are no small threat...”*

“That’s why we recruited him—for times like this.”

“A dangerous suggestion. Did you mean to arm yourselves against the gods of each faction?”

“How can we face gods and their like without the right negotiating tool?”

“Never mind. So you, descendent of the true Demon King Lucifer and bearer of the White Dragon Emperor, are challenging me... I’ve lived a long, long time, but

I confess I can't predict the outcome of our clash. If I defeat you, my soul will ascend to yet greater heights."

That sounded like he accepted the challenge! The White Dragon Emperor versus the highest-ranking grim reaper!

"I hear Issei Hyoudou has befriended his predecessors. Not me, though." Vali put his helmet back on.

Thud!

A massive amount of energy gathered around him. Damn this guy, going all out right from the start! His aura was practically flooding the place!

"Let me show you a completely different type of Juggernaut Drive, one with the negative thoughts of my predecessors completely sealed away."

Luminous wings extended from his back. Vali's demonic energy was off the charts. His pure white armor burned bright, and jewels appeared on every segment.

"Awakening, I, the White Dragon Emperor, who plunged the principle of the absolute into darkness."

Through the gemstone that I'd taken from him, I sensed the thoughts of the past White Dragon Emperors in my mind.

"Soaring to the heights of a Heavenly Dragon!"

"Marching down the path of the White Dragon's domination!"

"We will bring the infinite under our control! We will devour the illusion!"

The voices carried no hatred or enmity. Rather, they were possessed by an overwhelming urge to battle. Had they all reached an agreement by fighting?

"Through infinite ruin and dreams of dawn toward ascension—I become the Immaculate Dragon Dynast."

The next moment, Vali's armor changed shape with a silvery flash.

"Heed now the illusion of the White and the epitome of magic!"

"Juggernaut Overdrive!"

There, covered in argent armor, his aura having reached impossible heights, was something that could only be described as a being from another world. The surrounding buildings and cars were being crushed to a pulp without Vali even touching them. Seriously, how could everything fall apart from his mere presence?!

For all my incredulity, there was no doubting my eyes. Yep, this guy really was a monster. He'd sealed away his predecessors' negative thoughts, whereas I had worked to bring them around. Vali had found a way to master his Juggernaut Drive, which I had given up on because of the danger.

This was my rival... He-he-he. I'd promised this guy a showdown at some point in the future. Talk about intense...

"Empireo Juggernaut Overdrive, my enhanced Juggernaut Drive. I'm going to carve its power into your bones!" Vali declared.

Pluto slashed at high speed, moving so swiftly that he left after-images in his wake.

He was practically on par with Azazel as he brought his red scythe to bear! You definitely wouldn't want to let down your guard against that guy!

Snap!

There came a weak metallic sound. Vali snapped Pluto's weapon in half with only his hands!

He destroyed that creepy scythe in one hit!

"...!"

A shocked Pluto found himself on the receiving end of an uppercut to the jaw. With an awful crunch, he was thrown violently into the air!

Vali, meanwhile, raised his right hand and clenched his fist.

"Compress."

"Compression Divider!"

"Divide! Divide! Divide! Divide! Divide! Divide! Divide! Divide! Divide! Divide!"

Pluto's body began to fold in on itself, halving vertically, then horizontally,

then vertically again!

“What...?! Such power...!” Pluto screamed in disbelief.

Vali offered no mercy.

“Perish.”

The grim reaper had been reduced so much that I couldn't even see him anymore. A weak tremor passing through the air signaled the end of his existence.

Pluto, the strongest and highest-level grim reaper, had left this world without a trace.

Vali, now back in his usual Balance Breaker armor, was struggling to breathe despite the one-sided fight.

He certainly looked worn out, but he still annihilated Pluto by himself.

This was his answer to the Juggernaut Drive...

It was clearly miles ahead of my True Queen ability.

Curse that Vali, always finding new ways to get stronger. My friends were just as stunned as I was over this incredible power. However, Sairaorg was grinning.

“Frightening indeed, the Two Heavenly Dragons,” Cao Cao remarked as he approached us. “I was right to keep you from using your Juggernaut Drive in the artificial dimension, Vali...”

Even Cao Cao had to praise my rival...

“Juggernaut Drives may pack an enormous punch, but using them risks losing control, and possibly your life,” Vali explained. “The version I just used minimizes that danger. And unlike a regular Juggernaut Drive, there's room to grow. You should have finished me off when you had the chance, Cao Cao.”

Cao Cao gave no reply. Instead, his gaze turned to us. “There's something I want to check,” he said at last. “Issei Hyoudou. What are you, exactly?”

Huh? I was me. I tried to understand what he was getting at, but it was to no avail.

“No matter how you look at it, it doesn't make sense. You're an enigma,

making your way back here entirely by yourself. You're no longer a Heavenly Dragon, nor are you a True Dragon or a Dragon God... So what are you?"

"I guess Breast Dragon will have to do," I answered. To be honest, I couldn't be bothered thinking of anything else.

Cao Cao looked on blankly for a moment but soon broke into a chuckle. "I see. Yes, that's easy enough to follow." A moment later, he pointed his Holy Spear our way. "Now then, what's next? Issei Hyoudou, Vali, Sairaorg Bael. Which of you wants to play? All three of you, maybe? No, I'm afraid that would be too much. Only a fool would set themselves against three Longinuses."

Was he trying to provoke us? If Vali and Sairaorg joined, not even Cao Cao would emerge unscathed. Given what Vali had achieved, Cao Cao wouldn't stand a chance.

"You've seen four of his Seven Treasures, right?" Vali asked quietly as he made his way to me.

He was talking about Cao Cao's abilities.

"Yeah. There's the one that seals away women's abilities, one that destroys weapons, one that transfers attacks, and one that moves his opponents."

He'd used those during the battle the other day. I didn't have to worry about the one that stopped women's abilities, at least. However, that still left six other powers.

"Let me fill you in on the other three. One gives him the ability to fly, another creates doubles like Yuuto Kiba's Holy Sword—generating Balance Breaker, and the last conjures spheres of destructive power."

So he could fly, emulate Kiba, and fire spheres of raw destruction. Why was Vali telling me all this?

"Thanks, I guess?"

Why did I feel like I was being set up against Cao Cao?

In any event, I stepped forward.

Cao Cao grinned, evidently pleased. "It's to be the Red Dragon Emperor, then? Perhaps that explains why the others are holding back."

As he said, everyone else was giving us space to duke this out ourselves.

Yep, it was time for a little payback.

“I owe you for last time. I won’t be able to rest easy until we’re square.”

I couldn’t accept losing to this guy when I hadn’t even been able to put my True Queen ability to use.

Sensing my eagerness to fight him, Cao Cao tapped his spear against his shoulder. “Interesting. Last time, I made use of your Triaina ability’s weakness. Now I get to face you at your full strength. Equip your crimson armor!”

“You got it! Let’s go, Ddraig!”

“Yes! Once more against the ultimate Longinus! Partner, if we don’t defeat him here, we won’t be worthy of the title Red Dragon Emperor!”

“You can say that again!”

As my massive crimson aura swelled within me, I began the chant!

“Awakening, I, the Red Dragon Emperor, speak this truth unto the heavens!”

My predecessors, who’d participated in this invocation last time, were no longer with me.

“I embrace infinite hope and immortal dreams, to become the Crimson Dragon Dynast!”

But I wasn’t alone... Because my friends were all watching!

“I shall lead you down the crimson way of the primordial!”

“Cardinal Crimson Full Drive!”

My armor turned a deep crimson, its shape adjusting as well! The promotion to my True Queen form was complete! Fortunately, my Evil Pieces were still in good condition! A full transformation right after getting them back was fantastic! My True Queen ability was still unstable, but I had no other choice right now other than to go all out!

Cao Cao activated his rings as he watched me transform, seven orbs levitated around him. His way of activating his Balance Breaker was always quietly foreboding, almost creepy, even.

We readied ourselves while glaring at one another, then took off.

“Hatthiratana.”

One of those spheres moved beneath his feet, and Cao Cao flew up into the air!

This was his flight ability! In answer, I spread my dragon wings and followed suit!

“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”

I unleashed a volley of Dragon Shots through the gaps between skyscrapers! I would have let loose with a particularly powerful one, but I had to watch out for one of Cao Cao’s spheres. The orb generated a vortex, sucking my attacks right in!

He was redirecting my moves somewhere else! That meant they were going to be spat back out!

I detected another vortex opening below, and my Dragon Shots came flying back at me!

I narrowly avoided them, but then a wave of power came at me from Cao Cao’s Holy Spear!

“Whoa!”

Thankfully, I managed to evade and let off more blasts!

“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”

This time, I tried a scattershot approach, loosing a barrage of Dragon Shots!

“Kahabateiratana!”

Cao Cao sent another of his floating spheres forward. Several glowing humanoid shapes appeared around him. This was one of the other powers Vali mentioned earlier. It certainly did resemble Kiba’s Balance Breaker, creating soldiers that could be directed at will!

Still, they were no match for my shotgun-style Dragon Shots. Cao Cao was using them as a shield!

Somehow, he managed to disappear during my attacks. Where’d he go? I

glanced around, but it didn't take long for a spear to come racing for me from the side.

I managed to skirt the worst, but not without sustaining a graze to my abdomen! My armor took some light damage, but my body was unscathed!

"Dammit! That's the same as Kiba's ability! You mocked him before, but you've got a nearly identical power! And your soldiers are nowhere near as skilled as his! So what gives you the right to deride him?!"

Back in the artificial dimension, he'd beat Kiba's Dragon Knights without trouble. Yet the way I saw it, Cao Cao's creations didn't measure up to Kiba's in strength.

"Ha-ha-ha. Maybe so," Cao Cao replied with a laugh. "But I told you, didn't I? My abilities still need a little fine-tuning. That's why I took such an interest in Yuuto Kiba last time. Although I must say, I got tired after observing someone no better than me. Besides, my technique will be a little different once it's complete."

So that's what he'd meant back then! It sounded like he was going to be an even bigger nuisance in the future!

"Well, you're no slouch. I'll give you that. I suppose you did beat Azazel," I remarked.

"Governor Azazel. I *did* defeat him. I doubt a repeat would be a simple matter, however."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Cao Cao had seemed unstoppable. I'd never forget him dodging Azazel's attacks and impaling him with that spear. Honestly, it was still tough to believe Teach had lost.

Yet Cao Cao's next words came as a surprise: "That's the problem with scientist types like him. They keep researching new strategies until they're practically invincible. There's nothing more frightening for someone like me, who can be defeated in a single blow. I learned his strategy during our first bout and used it to defeat him the second time around... But three battles would be pushing my luck."

He was right, of course. Azazel wasn't going to just give up after suffering that defeat. If the two of them were to fight again, it would get pretty crazy.

"Now then, let's get back to it." Cao Cao brought his spear around and adjusted his battle stance.

Ah! He vanished and reappeared again! I had to be careful. After all, this was an aerial battle in the middle of a huge city! I didn't want to slip up!

I sensed him approaching from behind once again. Though I dodged the attack, he kept popping up in unexpected places, like a ferocious phantom!

Dammit! It's like he's teleporting from place to place! Hold on, teleportation...? That other sphere of his lets him shift his opponents' attacks, so maybe he can use it on himself, too!

This guy was just full of tricks! And like Rias had said last time, his spheres all looked the same, so there was no telling which he would use.

On top of that, it looked like he could employ them in combination! They were too damn versatile! That Holy Spear of his was scary enough, but the myriad of other abilities made him all the more terrifying. If this battle dragged on, I would be the one at a disadvantage! Undoubtedly, he was carrying at least one dose of Phoenix Tears!

But all the same, there had to be a way to beat this guy. And I had been mulling it over ever since losing to him in the artificial dimension.

If I could just put it into play, this would all be over. I had to make an opening, whatever it took!

That was easy enough to say, but the midair battle was fierce. I unleashed attack after attack, but Cao Cao would either parry them with his spheres or block them outright. It took everything I had to avoid his Holy Spear, which was constantly coming from unexpected directions.

I couldn't break past his guard, even by suddenly changing the trajectory of my Dragon Shots.

On top of that, the soldiers that Cao Cao generated kept teleporting all over the place, so I didn't have any time to properly ready my battle stance.

“Star Sonic Booster!”

Not even closing the distance at an incredibly high speed did the trick. Cao Cao always teleported away or bought time by using his summoned constructs as shields.

“Solid Impact Booster!”

On those occasions when I did manage to close in and unleash a destructive blow, Cao Cao either brushed it aside with his spear or used those orbs of his to beat a quick escape.

My punch missed its mark, sending a skyscraper crumbling into the ground... My apologies to whoever owned it!

Cao Cao possessed a keen understanding of the weaknesses of heavily armored opponents! He’d evaded Azazel and Vali when fighting them at the same time. Of course he had no difficulty getting around my attacks, too! An armored warrior had immense power, but their motions were also easy to read. Still, it was one thing to know that in theory, but it was something else entirely to actually capitalize on it. Seriously, this guy was insanely good!

I caught sight of his right eye—his Eye of Medusa. It could petrify anything in its sight! My armor had already been turned to stone in several places!

With every petrification, I had to destroy the affected sections of my suit and generate them anew. Fortunately, the effect didn’t extend to my actual flesh, which could only mean that its primary use was to hinder my movements.

The buildings around us crumbled one after the other... It was a good thing they were empty. No, this still wasn’t good. I was probably going to get chewed out when this was all over. Anyway, I could apologize later. For now, I had to focus on beating Cao Cao!

Seriously, Cao Cao had me against the wall! The damage to my armor was slowly building up!

At this rate, he would learn my fighting style by heart! How could Cao Cao move with all the finesse of a technical fighter? He’d even surpassed Kiba in that regard!

Even if I wanted to use my Crimson Blaster against him, the time it would take to charge would leave me with a fatal opening!

This was the worst kind of opponent for a power-type fighter like me!

Detecting something, I beat my wings as a ray of red light reached me, restoring my strength.

In the distance, Rias was firing breast beams at me from atop a building.

Ah, Rias! You'd downsize your breasts for me? Her love was so heartwarming! Breast power from the woman I loved! There was no greater power-up!

I'd sensed her intentions intuitively without us needing to discuss them ahead of time. Our hearts were communicating on instinct! I couldn't get enough of it!

"So this is your Breast Beam. I see. You're a terrifying couple," Cao Cao said with a chuckle.

Damn him, laughing at Rias's Breast Beam! I wouldn't allow it!

"Take this!"

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

Transferring that power to the seed of flame in my stomach, I unleashed a tremendous burst of fire!

It was a wide-ranging attack that filled the sky with surging flames! My opponent was merely human, so even if I couldn't score a direct hit, I could still deal a lot of damage with the heat alone. He couldn't possibly defend against it.

And yet...

Viiii-iiii-iiii!

Cao Cao's Holy Spear released supercharged light, instantly eradicating my fire breath.

Shoot. Vali did mention something about this. Basically, Cao Cao could unleash tremendous energy whenever he felt like it...

He brought his spear around, swiping at my side! Uh-oh!

I flew up high to dodge, and the building behind me caved in. It had been

cleaved clean in two!

And it wasn't just that one! The wave of energy kept going, ripping through several more structures!

How many skyscrapers had he brought down with that one strike?

Had he hit me, a demon, I would have been obliterated on the spot!

"Ha-ha-ha!" Cao Cao laughed with a broad grin. "Amazing! So this is your True Queen ability! I can't score a clean hit! And you can't, either! Look at me. I've broken out into goose bumps! One hit from you, and I'll be finished!"

Sure, but that didn't mean anything when I couldn't hit him! Why couldn't he just let me land an attack?! Then this would all be over!

With a dexterous spin of his spear, Cao Cao lunged with a low sweep, then he stepped back to avoid a blow from above. At that moment, one of his spheres appeared at the top of his weapon.

"Compared to Vali, you still have a way to go," he said with a smirk. "Parinayakaratana!"

The sphere shot for my abdomen! Just before it could hit me, I gathered my aura in my hands and reinforced my arms with the powers of a Rook. Then, I put my arms together and caught the attack head-on!

The moment it connected, an incredible shock coursed through my arms and into my body. Apparently, not even a Rook could withstand this!

That's when I realized that this sphere was full of destructive power! Vali had warned me about this ability!

Still, I could hardly believe it... How was it so strong?!

It sent me flying backward!

Craaaaash!

I collided with a building, blasting through the glass window and the interior walls before hurtling out from the other side.

The same thing happened for the next building, and the one after that—in through one wall, out through another.

I ended up losing count of how many skyscrapers I passed through but finally lost enough momentum to hit a floor and stay put.

Gah...

Blood came up in coughs, and intense pain shot through my gut. All that from just one strike... My insides were damaged, and some of my ribs might have broken, too.

My armor was destroyed, the reinforced arm sections I'd tried to use as shields had shattered... I couldn't even feel my hands...

I could hardly move my legs. Standing was probably out of the question for a while. Raw, unbridled destructive power? Why hadn't he used that attack before? Maybe he needed to charge it? Or perhaps there was some kind of limit on the number of times he could fire it off?

The answer had to be one or the other. Otherwise, it didn't make sense to hold back something so powerful. If he'd used it earlier, he could have vanquished me easily. That Cao Cao waited this long suggested some hindering condition.

He-he-he. I'd fought so many overpowered foes that I was starting to pick up on the basics of strategy despite being a dimwit.

Still, given that those enemies were all basically fiendish monsters, I needed to learn more. Seriously, it wasn't easy being the Red Dragon Emperor.

Huh...? Something about where I landed caught my attention. There was a Switch Princess toy rolling across the floor near my hand.

I glanced about and realized that I was in a toy store. When I broke through the glass, the impact must have upended the merchandise, as the shelves had collapsed, scattering toys all around.

Then that means... My numb hand trembled while I reached for the toy. I'd hit upon an idea.

"My Seven Treasures are still incomplete. My focus is on raw, destructive power, but I can't help but think that's a little simple. Any potent weapon can wreak havoc. I need to come up with some better ideas... Nothing too

outlandish, of course... So do you want to call it quits? From the look of things, your crimson armor has its limits...," Cao Cao said as he entered through the broken window.

"Hey, let me ask you something," I began. "If you fought Vali as he is now, do you think you could win?"

"...No. He killed Pluto in the blink of an eye. It's no exaggeration to say that he has transcended mortal limits... He's too much for me. The power differential is simply too great. He could bulldoze his way right through me."

For some reason, hearing that came as a relief... Honestly, I'd been worried about my rival, but Cao Cao's words made sense. Vali wouldn't lose if he used his new technique again.

It didn't matter, though, because I was the one who'd beat Cao Cao. Me.

Now, if I could only think up a way to turn this around...

"Heh." I let out a raspy chuckle.

"Something funny?" Cao Cao asked, suspicious.

"It's just like that other time," I answered.

I was referring to my head-to-head with Riser. This scene, this situation. I was at the end of my rope during that fight, too.

Yet I'd still pushed on.

"You know, Cao Cao," I said. "Like you, I'm the kind of guy who aims for an opponent's weaknesses. To protect the girl I love, to take her back. So I pushed my tiny, useless brain to its limit."

"What are you talking about? You don't look like you've lost your mind... Are you up to something?"

"Back then, all I had left was a tiny amount of dragon power. And the same's true now."

I raised the Switch Princess doll that I'd picked up a minute ago, showing it to him.

"There's a hidden trick on this toy. The breast part pops off. Rias got a pretty

big surprise when the test models arrived... Apparently, it was Sirzechs's idea."

"And? What about it?"

I pulled a small bullet from my pocket, a little something that I'd picked up in the dimensional void.

"I found this on a golem in the gap between dimensions, a broken Gogmagog. It looks like it came from a machine gun for taking down monsters. It might be old, but the shape is pretty much identical to modern-day bullets... That got me thinking that maybe human creations are pretty much god class these days."

I loaded the bullet into the breast part of the Switch Princess doll and transferred my Red Dragon Emperor power into it.

"Transfer!"

Pressing the button on the doll's back sent the bullet speeding for Cao Cao.

"Have you lost your mind?" Cao Cao easily deflected the projectile with his Holy Spear.

However, when the bullet broke, it released a liquid that splashed on his right eye.

Surprised, he tried to wipe it away.

"What was that...?" he asked. Something strange occurred to his body. "Gah..." He coughed, spitting blood. "Geh!"

Cao Cao writhed in agony as his muscles spasmed. He dropped to his knees.

As he crawled on all fours and hacked up blood, he seemed to realize what had happened.

"Y-you...! Auuuuuggggghhhhh!"

I had to imagine he was in unbelievable pain, more than he could possibly bear.

Having regained my strength, I rose back to my feet. "That's Samael's blood," I told Cao Cao, writhing on the ground. "The same blood Shalba used on me."

Cao Cao's eyes widened in alarm.

“It was drained from my body. That’s when it hit me. Wasn’t the biblical God’s curse, the one that he placed on Samael, based on his hatred of dragons and snakes?”

“My eye...?! My Eye of Medusa...?!”

That’s right. Cao Cao’s eye was being destroyed by the poison, and blood poured out in profuse quantity.

“Yeah. A medusa is a monster with hair made of snakes, right? So I thought the poison might work on your transplanted eye. I came up with the idea in the dimensional void, so I had Ophis put the blood in the Gogmagog bullet I picked up.”

This was the solution I’d come up with after struggling to devise a strategy to beat Cao Cao while I was in the dimensional void. That being said, if the two of us ever fought again, I would need a new plan.

It was all thanks to recalling my battle with Riser right when we happened upon the deactivated Gogmagog.

“Gah! Hah... Hah... He-he-he... I didn’t see that one coming...” Cao Cao chuckled despite the immense pain.

“I was on the verge of death since I’m both dragon and demon. You may be descended from a hero, but ultimately you’re just human... Can a human withstand Samael’s curse?”

“Probably not... My body is already shutting down... And Phoenix Tears...are useless on that curse... So I’ve lost...precisely *because* I’m human...! Ha-ha-ha! You’ve exploited *my* weakness this time.... How ironic!”

Cao Cao laughed even as he choked in anguish.

“That’s right. Your weakness is that you’re human.”

He wouldn’t be able to fight anymore. In fact, his Balance Breaker had already deactivated. His spear had similarly lost its strength.

I’d won.

I couldn’t believe it. A doll based on Rias, a breast missile fired from a Switch Princess figurine, brought me victory.

“Squishy, squishy, ooooooh!” came the electronic voice from the doll.

Ha-ha-ha, seriously? Can this be any more like me? I couldn't help but break into a fit of laughter.

How's that, my esteemed predecessors? “Squishy, squishy, ooooooh” indeed. No wonder you were all so crazy about it.

“Since it's come to this, I'll have to use the Truth Idea.”

—! *Wh-what?!*

I could only gape at Cao Cao's remark! He raised his spear to the air and began to chant, even as his hands trembled.

“O spear that does slay gods... Draw the ambition of the dynast that dwells within me, pierce the gulf between blessing and destruction... Speak your will, shine radiant...”

The tip of the Holy Spear began to open, an enormous amount of light bursting to life... That holy aura certainly didn't look good...

What was it going to do? Back when Azazel had explained the Longinus to us, he'd noted that something akin to the will of the deceased biblical God was stored within it. Vali had said something similar, noting that it possessed powers similar to but different from a Juggernaut Drive... That really didn't clear much up, though. Juggernaut Drives were incarnations of raw destruction triggered when a Sacred Gear went out of control. In any event, this Truth Idea would probably devastate the entire city if Cao Cao activated it!

I could either fortify my defenses or use a Knight's abilities to escape... What to do?

At that moment, the light emanating from the spear weakened, eventually fading altogether.

Cao Cao beheld this development with wide-eyed shock.

He'd looked so confident a minute ago. What happened?

“It's not...working...?” he murmured, as if in response to my unvoiced question.

I'd been prepared for the worst when I saw that radiance, but the Holy Spear didn't seem all that threatening anymore. In fact, its aura was rapidly diminishing.

A second later, Cao Cao apparently sensed something from the spear, his expression turning stern. "I see... So this is your will... You've placed the Red Dragon Emperor's dreams ahead of my ambition."

I still didn't have the faintest idea what he was going on about... At any rate, I took it to mean the spear wasn't going to power up.

"You've been cursed, Cao Cao." Vali announced as he came through the shattered window.

"Vali... There's no stopping your rival," Cao Cao replied.

"Not for you, there isn't... Why did the Truth Idea fail?" Vali asked. "You've used it before, haven't you? I sensed it on my way here."

I wanted to ask the same thing.

"The Truth Idea is deeply connected to the biblical God's will. The will of the departed God absorbs the ambitions of the spear's wielder to produce miraculous effects tailor-made for opponents... It's supposed to offer overwhelming advantages or blessings to demoralize its foes... Yet its response to the Red Dragon Emperor was silence. It chose him as the victor of this contest. It prefers his dreams over mine. Had the spear chosen *my* dreams, it would have healed me or granted me immense strength..."

The Holy Spear accepted my victory because it thought my dreams were better than Cao Cao's?

Vali grinned. "It chose Issei Hyoudou over its own user? I told you, didn't I? You should've taken us both down while you had the chance. Now look what's happened. Not a very exciting ending, is it? I suppose I'm the only one capable of beating the Red Dragon Emperor," he said with a mocking laugh.

"I wanted to beat him," Cao Cao cursed.

Seriously, you two! Stop fighting over me! You're giving me the creeps! Lately, it seemed like all sorts of weirdos had taken an interest in me—guys especially!

I wanted to be chased after by *girls*! Not macho dudes, dammit!

“I will be the one to defeat Issei Hyoudou.”

“You’re rather popular, Issei.”

Sairaorg and Kiba had arrived, nearly doubling the number of guys here.

They were making me *really* uncomfortable! Everyone present was throwing me a kind of hungry glance! *N-noooooo! Rias, Asia, Akeno, Koneko, Xenovia, Irina, Rossweisse, Ravel! Won’t somebody help me?!*

“The Two Heavenly Dragons, the King of Lions, the user of the Holy Demon Sword... This doesn’t look good. At this rate, I’ll be slaughtered... Or maybe I was already done for when we lost Leonardo...? Going after you was a mistake. Perhaps we should have used Samael on the Great Red instead of Ophis. I never thought going up against the Gremory Familia in Kyoto...would be what spelled our doom...”



Cao Cao's breath was growing ragged. Not only was he spouting nonsense, his face had turned a sickly hue. Unlike Vali, he couldn't hold the curse at bay because he lacked supernatural powers. He was only going to get worse.

A familiar mist rose around us, and a figure I recognized emerged.

"...Let's go, Cao Cao."

It was Georg, worn and ragged. He was missing an eye and an arm, and his left leg was blackened. He clearly wasn't in any state to fight.

"Georg..."

"Cao Cao... We miscalculated, but we weren't wrong..." He paused there, taking Cao Cao's hand and activating a teleportation circle while looking at us.

Hold on! I'm not about to let you get away! Everyone, excluding Vali, leaped after them, but the Holy Spear emitted a blinding light, holding us back. How did it still have so much power?!

"If we keep going after the Heavenly Dragons, we'll be wiped out... Like Shalba and the others," Georg muttered.

"You're right, Georg..."

Sairaorg fought through the holy aura to hurl a well-aimed punch.

But Cao Cao and Georg were already gone.

It had only lasted for a second, but that blinding light had bought them all the time they needed.

And now they were gone.

-○○●○-

I had let my guard down, right when it mattered most. How could I have messed up like that?

I sat in silence, brooding. Sairaorg came to pat me on the head. "Don't look so down. You won. I doubt either of them will be ready for another fight any time soon. Heck, they'll probably have permanent injuries after all that," he said.

I could only guess how Samael's poison would affect Cao Cao. It had completely destroyed me, a demon and a dragon. The future didn't seem bright

as far as Cao Cao was concerned.

“If you’ve gotten through to the Great Red, then I guess I’ll have to settle things with you before challenging the Dragon God,” Vali remarked, shooting a look at me.

A direct challenge, huh? Typical.

“Yeah? Bring it,” I answered. “I’ll get even stronger and beat you to a pulp.”

“You’d better be careful. More and more people are learning to fear you, but at the same time, more will come after you. That’s what happens when you start befriending the True Dragon and the Dragon God.”

That *was* a frightening notion. But if new challengers reared their heads, I would just have to overcome them all.

“No matter what comes, I’ll keep aiming for my dreams: to become a high-class demon, to be a harem king, and to be king of Rating Games!”

Vali broke into an amused smile at this declaration.

“Ddraig... Are you taking a break?”

“Maybe I should... Or else... Sorry, Albion.”

Albion and Ddraig were talking to each other? About what?

At that moment, I sensed a new presence approaching. It was Arthur, who stepped through the entrance dressed like a true gentleman.

“Vali,” he called. “Everyone’s here. We staged a good rampage, exactly as planned.”

“I see. Thanks.” With that, Vali turned and left.

“Yuuto Kiba.” Arthur’s eyes went to my good friend. “You seem like the worthiest opponent for that which I seek, the Holy King Sword Collbrande. When Vali looks for Issei Hyoudou in battle, I’ll be expecting you. Until then, I hope we both steer clear of danger.”

Having said his piece, Arthur exited with Vali.

Kiba smiled at Arthur’s challenge. Had he gotten stronger while I was away? *Hold on. Don’t those demon swords sheathed at his waist belong to Siegfried?!*

“Did you take Siegfried down?” I asked, gesturing to the swords.

“Huh? Oh, these? Well, a lot happened. We all pitched in.”

So basically, Kiba got his hands on some new weapons.

“My Familia is waiting for me,” Sairaorg said, turning to the window. “I’d better be off.”

“Thank you, Sairaorg,” I called to him.

With a wave of his hand, he leaped down through the broken window.

What an exit. How very typical of him.

“I’ll go let the others know what happened. Get some rest, Issei,” Kiba said, following suit.

Now I was all alone. Maybe I would have a look around the store before everyone else got here.

“That was a good battle, partner. You used physical might and brains... You’re still lacking in a few areas, but you’re improving... Yes, it was a good match,” Ddraig praised.

“What’s with the sudden seriousness?” I questioned.

“Nothing. You’re doing well. That’s all that matters...”

“...You sound kind of down.”

Ddraig was practically trailing off at the end of his statements. I’d never heard him talk like this before.

“I used too much of myself restoring your body... I’ll probably lose consciousness before too long...”

—!

Wh-what are you talking about?! Ddraig?! Why didn’t you say anything?!

So that conversation with Albion... That was meant as a farewell of sorts...?

You’ve gotta be kidding me! Hold up! Wait!

“Don’t worry... I’ll make sure you can still use the Boosted Gear without me... So I’m glad...that I got to see a good battle at the very end...” His voice was

growing weaker by the second.

“Wait...! I—I... Without you, I’m useless!”

“No, you’re not... You have...your friends... You don’t need...me...anymore...”

I could barely hear him! Seriously?! Why did this have to happen?!

I do need you! You’re my partner! We’re supposed to always be together! We’re the Red Dragon Emperor, right...? And...we’ve been having so much fun!

At home! At school! Fighting Kokabiel! Our first fight with Vali! Camping in the mountains over the summer! Battling the Sitri Familia! And Loki! Even Kyoto! And the match against Bael’s Familia, too!

My tears knew no end, streaming down my face. My nose ran freely...

My memories, all those times spent together with Ddraig, flashed through my head... There wasn’t anything I could do, though.

Why did he have to give up his life to restore my body?!

His final words came through clearly. *“Partner—Issei. Thank you. It was fun...”*

“Ddraig...? Hey... Come on, answer me... Partner...?”

This isn’t fair! You only called me by my name at the end! Talk to me! Call me Issei again! Please! This isn’t... This isn’t right...

No matter how I pleaded, my jewel didn’t answer. Was he already gone?

A weak sound reached my ears. *“Zzzzz-zzzzz-zzzzz...”*

A snore.

Hold on, a snore? S-so he’s sleeping...?

“Ddraig is exhausted from using his powers in the dimensional void. He’s asleep,” said a figure gently touching my gauntlet.

It was Ophis. I hadn’t even noticed her arrive.

“Ophis? Hold on, so he’s just getting some shut-eye?!”

D-damn him! He’d just nodded off?! He had me seriously worried!

“Ddraig...! You got me...! Y-you idiot...!”

I had to cry as I clutched my gauntlet! That would have been a hell of a way to say good-bye to someone, especially when it came on so abruptly! We'd been through so much!

Still, I was relieved. *Thanks for being there for me, buddy. Now get some rest.*

I could sense my friends approaching.

They would be here soon. The middle-class demon promotion exam had to be done by now. It had been a long and hard road, that was for sure.

And it wasn't over until we got home.

"Let's go, Ophis. We're heading back with everyone."

"I will return to the Red Dragon Emperor's home," she answered with an adorable smile.

This wasn't some terrorist mastermind, just an insanely strong and incredibly lonely dragon.

Right as I got ready to leave, I remembered something.

Oh, what about the midterm test at school?

Despair took me.

Azazel

The tense atmosphere had begun to ease when I—Azazel—received word that the alliance had successfully destroyed the Bandersnatches and the Jabberwocky.

We'd been engaged in a fierce standoff with Hades the whole time. The thought of staring at that skeletal bastard's face for a second longer made me want to puke.

Once word of our victory came through, Sirzechs dispelled his destructive aura and returned to his original form... Well, technically, I suppose what we'd just seen was his true original form, but whatever...

In any event, his anger abated considerably when we heard that Issei was back. The same went for me, too. Damn that kid. He would have to make a grand show of his return.

The acts of terrorism perpetrated by the holdouts of the old Demon King regime were almost completely taken care of. If the news was to be believed, the underworld had been spared the worst-case scenario.

Unsurprisingly, Team Vali had skedaddled before word reached us of their involvement. That was pretty typical.

Likewise, I'd sent back the Slash Dog. We didn't need him here anymore.

It was a good thing that we hadn't been forced to annihilate Hades. No matter how much he hated us, he was still a god of the netherworld. His destruction would mean tremendous upheaval for various factions.

It was time to give the bastard one final warning before heading off. Before I could, one of the grim reapers arrived with a report for his master.

"Lord Hades. Most reapers in the temple...have been frozen."

“Is this your doing, Joker?” There was a dangerous glint in Hades’s eyes.

Dulio let out a deep sigh as he rubbed his shoulders. “Lord Michael would give me an earful if I didn’t accomplish that much. Basically, I just froze any suspicious-looking guys. I couldn’t be bothered to get ’em all. Sorry, bad habit. So there’s that. Amen.”

The guy was as aloof and flippant as ever.

But he had the strength to back it up.

Dulio was Heaven’s trump card. Although a man of few words, he was also a league above most everyone else. Single-handedly freezing all those reapers was no small feat.

The Zenith Tempest—a top-tier Longinus with the ability to manipulate the weather and control the elements. Used right, it could respond to practically any situation. It even worked indoors.

Dulio might have even been a challenge for Cao Cao. I was pretty sure he’d have the advantage.

Anyway, we managed to stop that damn Hades from interfering any further. That was a big enough success on its own. The skeletal bastard was clearly up to something. It was hard to read his expression, what with him not having any flesh, but I could tell that he was furious.

“We’re not about to drop all that stuff about Samael, you hear me? Especially now that we’ve taken two core members of the Hero Faction alive,” I declared.

The Gremory Familia had run into them and given them a good beating. I was really getting tired of all these encounters, but at least things ended well this time.

Thanks to them, Heracles and Jeanne were now our captives. I would make sure to give them both a thorough questioning. There was nothing better than living witnesses.

Hades offered no response to my statement.

As we turned to go, Sirzechs said politely, “We’ll take our leave, Lord Hades. Apologies again for the unannounced visit.” The next moment, however, he

exuded tremendous menace. “Let me say this, though—there will be no next time. If I have to come back here, it will be to annihilate you.”

What an intimidating threat, and from our dear old Demon King no less.

Hades laughed. *“Kya-ha-ha-ha. I like that glint to your eyes. Oh yes, I’ll remember.”*

“I don’t wanna have to come back here, either,” I mumbled.

Seriously, just don’t try messing with us again, Mr. Scary Skeleton God.

-○○●○-

“Azazel,” Sirzechs called out as she reached the gate connecting the underworld and the netherworld. His expression was unusually stern.

“What is it now?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately, wondering if the days of Demon Kings like me and Ajuka could be coming to an end.”

Now, this was an interesting turn. I listened silently.

“Our powers were the main reason we became Demon Kings,” he continued.

Indeed, the current Four Great Demon Kings were each unique individuals possessed of immense strength, born to families outside those of the original Demon Kings. Several individuals like them had been born after the war between the three great powers.

Sirzechs clenched his fist, his expression dower. “But there are things that cannot be overturned with an individual’s power, no matter how strong they are. Such rulers give birth to the seeds of rebellion.”

He was right, of course. The current demon government had overthrown their predecessors to bring change to the underworld. Sirzechs and the other current Demon Kings had led that charge.

As a result, the losers had been driven away, cursing Sirzechs’s power for generations. To put it simply, that was the root of all the upheaval that had recently befallen the underworld.

“You know, Azazel, there’s a different kind of strength than that of an individual. And it already exists in the modern demon world.”

“What?”

“The power of *community*. My sister, Rias, and future brother-in-law, Issei, were born within it. Even if the power of the individual is limited, the power that gathers around them—a *community*—enriches their bonds and empowers them. It gives them the strength to break down limitations, smash through barriers, and grow. And I’m not just talking about Rias and her friends. Sairaorg, born without any power of destruction, would have normally perished. Yet he built strong friendships, and he embraced his dream by clinging to his ideals. His success is the result of his community, too.”

Maybe the same applied to that upstart, Vali. He seemed to be having no trouble gathering friends and allies.

Community, huh?

“Issei even managed to reel in Ophis. Right, Sirzechs? I don’t think anyone will be able to ignore him now.”

“Hmm. The same might be said for Vali and his Juggernaut Drive... The Infinite Dragon, the Two Heavenly Dragons, and the Dragon Kings gathering around them... Yes, dragons always shift the currents of the world, the torrent of power.”

Yep, dragons were literally masses of raw power. It’s why humans worshiped them since time immemorial. It couldn’t be helped—strong dragons attracted strong followers.

What was next for Issei and Vali, then? I suppose that remained to be seen...

“All right, I’m off. Gotta report to Lord Michael.” With that, Dulio spread his angel wings and bade us a simple farewell. “See ya! It was fun. ‘Community,’ eh?”

He flew off, raising his hands to make a circle! He certainly had a mischievous side... Had he been listening to our conversation?

I breathed a tired sigh as I watched him leave. “I guess I’m gonna be in the market for a new job, too,” I remarked.

Sirzechs narrowed his eyes. “So that’s what it’s come to?”

“Yep. Ophis has decided to stick with Issei because of me. I’m not gonna be able to shirk responsibility this time. My days as governor are over... I’ll be stepping down.”

The fact that I’d helped Ophis meet Issei and the others without consulting the three great powers clearly violated our treaty, no matter the outcome. The blame fell squarely on me. I’d be doing the Grigori a disservice if I clung greedily to my position. It’d be nothing but trouble.

“Besides, we’ve already eliminated most dissenters in our own ranks—the ones helping the terrorists.”

Those traitors included Vali and parts of the middle management, in particular a group of high-level fallen angels who leaked sensitive information...

They’d already been captured, and most were awaiting judgment... Well, a few had escaped. And as a result, the top members of the Grigori had shrunk yet again. There were only a few leaders left compared to the old days during the war, most of whom were now dedicated to their research. Sariel, Benemune, Tamiel. Lieutenant Governor Shemhazai wasn’t much different, I suppose.

“Maybe it’s time for our organization to move on, too...,” I muttered.

Sirzechs’s expression soured. “I hear that Heaven has also identified traitors among its people and has brought them to justice.”

“Yeah. Some escaped, though, turning into fallen angels and joining up with the Khaos Brigade. Frankly, I’m surprised those traitorous high rankers didn’t become fallen angels sooner.

“Apparently, blind spots have emerged in the system since the biblical God’s death. They must have taken advantage of them. Everything is changing, it seems.”

On the demon side, the old Demon King regime would likely pop up to cause trouble in the future. That was a tough bunch. However, this incident had brought them down a notch or two. Barring something catastrophic, they’d probably just lie low and observe from the sidelines for a while.

“Are the fallen angels planning on increasing their numbers, like the new

Brave Saints system Heaven put in place?” Sirzechs asked.

I shook my head. “There are already more than enough rogue angels out there. And that isn’t just my opinion. The entire leadership agrees with me. So long as we have peace, expanding the organization is unnecessary. We’re good just maintaining the status quo. That said, we’ll always welcome any angels who want to come down from on high to join us.”

“Bringing Ophis to our side was quite the achievement for the Grigori and for you. It will go down in history, Azazel. There’s no doubt about it. You’re the one who made it happen.”

“Don’t go lavishing praise on me. It’s embarrassing. But you know what, Sirzechs? I’m a big bad-guy boss. My name is all over the Bible. I don’t need to stand out in underworld history. It’s enough for people to remember you, Rias, and Issei. I’m fine just being the leader of the fallen angels.”

“Azazel...”

Come on now, don’t look so disappointed.

Scratching my cheek, I flashed Sirzechs a mischievous grin. “Hey, it’s just a change of title. I’ll still be me. I’m just retiring from the front lines. Besides, I’ve got plenty of students thanks to you and Michael. I can spend the rest of my days looking out for them.”

With Issei, the Gremory Familia, Vali, and his team, there was no need for me to fight anymore.

Hearing all this, Sirzechs let out a loud laugh. “You’re starting to sound like an old codger.”

“I might look young, but I *am* pretty old, you know. I’ve been here since long before you were a twinkle in your parents’ eyes. You should respect your elders, kiddo.”

“Indeed. We could both take those words to heart going forward,” Sirzechs joked.

Ugh. Anyway, the incident was over. Maybe I could finally make some time to take those young idiots out to a hot spring trip to Atami or Izu.

Word of Azazel's resignation as governor of the Grigori was promptly sent to the leaders of all the major forces.

During his tenure, he'd been responsible for countless achievements and accomplishments in battle. However, his greatest triumphs of all were guiding the Red Dragon Emperor, who had experienced exceptionally rapid growth, and the White Dragon Emperor, widely regarded as the strongest incarnation in history.

Hero...?

“Yo, Cao Cao. Down in the dumps, eh? All that prep, and your Hero Faction’s plans have been foiled. Nothin’ beats a nice double whammy of treachery and coincidence, huh? You even managed to get three Longinuses all broken up.”

“Lord Sakra... I didn’t expect you to journey down to the mortal world.”

“Your Balance Breaking Sacred Gear guys are all toast, and your Longinuses have been trashed. You, Georg, and Leonardo are all out of action, eh? So what’s next?”

“...We’ll rebuild. A new Ophis will be born, and we’ll make a new Khaos Brigade around her... This incident has weakened us too much for now, though. We’ll have to go into hiding for a while.”

“Yeah, I thought so. But your face says something different. You look like someone who’s had their soul utterly crushed. The Two Heavenly Dragons sent you packin’, right? And they got ya with Samael’s poison, too, yeah? It’ll never heal, even if you do remove it. You’re only human.”

“Beaten by the Two Heavenly Dragons... I suppose I can’t deny it.”

“Man, that sounds pretty lame. What did you wanna be? A hero? A baddie? Or maybe you got greedy, and you wanted it all?”

“There was no other option for me. I’m the descendant of an ancient hero, born with the gift of the world’s most powerful spear. What else could I do but root out dangerous supernatural beings?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Listen up, you little punk! Here’s a piece of advice from a pissed-off Buddha-God! There are a lotta guys like you, B-grade upstarts who can level up to S-grade when they get serious. The problem is the rare B-class loser both in everyday life *and* when he gets serious. When he really sets sight on somethin’, he pulls out an SSS-class wildcard. That’s the guy you wanna be

careful around. He'll flip an unwinnable match on its head with some crazy trick you never even thought of... You ought to know that from firsthand experience by now. 'Cause that's who the Red Dragon Emperor is."

"..."

"If you wanna come out on top against guys like that, you need the power to bend fate itself. Sure, you have the Holy Spear, but you were born in the same age as *this* Red Dragon Emperor and *this* White Dragon Emperor. Rotten timin', huh?"

"Next time—"

"Next time? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I don't think so. You're done. That spear of yours has rejected you, and you're cursed. You're as good as dead, am I right?"

"...So what are you going to do with me?"

"I was thinkin' of sending you, Georg, and Leonardo down to the netherworld together. Hades ain't in a good mood right now. I thought maybe you could cheer him up. You can wait down there for someone to dangle down a spider's thread for you to escape... I'll be takin' your toys, by the way. Three Balance Breakers... It brings tears to the eyes!"

"...You're a cruel god."

"Yeah? That's rich coming from someone scheming from the shadows to play me and all the other deities for fools. I guess I got lucky... Tell you what, if you return from the netherworld, I'll let you have your Holy Spear back. You'd have to be one hell of a hero to pull that off. Then again, the Red Dragon Emperor managed it."

New Life

Azazel told us the awful news in the clubroom a few days after all the trouble in the underworld.

“Y-you were ousted as governor?! Seriously?! Whaaaaat?!”

Yup. Azazel had resigned from his post as leader of the fallen angels because he’d brought Ophis to meet us.

“Shut up,” he said with a sigh while picking his ear. “I didn’t have any choice. I went and brought Ophis over without telling anyone.”

“S-so what’s your job now...?” I asked.

“Hmm?” He craned his neck. “I guess I’m basically supervising this town. It’s an important site for the alliance between the three great powers. And among the Grigori, I’m now a special technical adviser.”

A supervisor and a technical adviser. Huh. Technically, his job had changed, but it didn’t sound that different.

“From governor to supervisor...,” Koneko whispered.

“Well, that’s the gist of it. Shemhazai is governor of the Grigori now. He’s picked Baraqiel as his second-in-command. Ah, it’s a load off my mind! Formal titles are best left to hardheads like those two. Now I can concentrate on my hobbies.”

Maybe it was me, but he sounded even more outspoken. Was he feeling liberated without the responsibilities of leadership? It was certainly possible!

Uh-oh! Shemhazai, Baraqiel! You have to do something about him! Seal him away before he goes and does anything crazy! You could lock him up in Cocytus, like Samael!

Azazel, clearly in a good mood, pulled out three sets of documents. “The

results from the middle-class demon promotion exam the other day,” he said. “Sirzechs is preoccupied, so I’m handing these out on his behalf.”

—! Seriously?! The results have already been announced?! And without any prior notice?!

“First up, Kiba. You passed! Congrats, you’re now a middle-class demon. It’ll be made official at the ceremony later, but you can have your certificate now.”

Whoa! I didn’t have any time to prepare myself emotionally. But I was glad that Kiba passed!

“Thank you. I respectfully accept,” he said, taking the papers with a bow of his head.

Ah, my buddy was being elevated to a middle-rank demon right before my eyes!

“Next, Akeno. You also passed, which makes you a middle-class demon. I told Baraqiel earlier. You wouldn’t believe how much he cried.”

“Oh, Father... Thank you. I’m glad to accept this,” Akeno said. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

She had made it as well. Good job, Akeno!

Which meant it was time for the last papers... Mine.

“Your turn, Issei.”

“R-right!”

Man, was I nervous. The practical exam was one thing, but I didn’t have any confidence in my performance on the written component... I didn’t believe I’d scored particularly bad, though...

Just as my negative thoughts were about to get the better of me, Azazel hurriedly said, “You also passed. Congratulations, you’re now a middle-class demon, Red Dragon Emperor.”

—!

I had done it.

“Y-yeeeeessssss!” I cried out, raising my hands in the air. “I’m a middle-class

demon! Awesome! Seriously, thanks!”

I’d scored a promotion! To middle-class level! From that day forward, I was officially a step closer on the path to becoming a harem king! No, ten steps closer!

“Congratulations!”

“Congrats!”

“Good job!”

“I knew you could do it, but congratulations.”

“I expected no less from the man I’m going to manage...! B-but congratulations all the same.”

Asia, Xenovia, Irina, Koneko, and Ravel all showered me with praise! Thank you, everyone! I’d never been happier to have been reborn as a demon! I was crying tears of joy!

Azazel pointed my way. “Well, there aren’t many crazy idiots who could pull themselves back from the brink like you did. Your resurrection is already the talk of the town among all the higher-ups. The groups opposing the current Demon Kings are definitely gonna fear you now.”

“Wh-why?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Someone can literally kill you, and you still won’t die. Name something more terrifying than that. Samael’s poison got you, but you regenerated a new body using the Great Red’s powers in the dimensional void. That’s insane. You’re completely out there. Not just in the head, either. Everything about you is nuts.”

Well, it had been a weird turn of events. But to think that the big important demons were in awe of my return... I didn’t know what was going on anymore!

In the underworld, it was being reported that the Lucifer Familia and I had fought together with the Great Red, who’d simply appeared by chance. Our combined strength defeated the Jabberwocky. My merging with the Great Red was being concealed from the general demon public. Apparently, the truth was considered top secret.

Incidentally, the situation with my death and rebirth was likewise being kept quiet.

“Your power to attract powerful people and entities is out of this world. You know what? Sirzechs and I can rest easy. ‘Cause if you keep it up, you guys are gonna beat every baddie who comes our way.”

T-Teach...! Seriously, cut me some slack! I’d had enough of crazy strong people coming after us! I just wanted to live a peaceful and erotic life with the girls in the club! I didn’t want to spend my whole life fighting!

There was something else on my mind, too.

“Um, Teach? What happened to the Khaos Brigade? The Hero Faction, I mean.”

I’d cursed Cao Cao, the group’s leader, with Samael’s blood. I doubted he was in good shape right now... But knowing him, he’d probably found some way to recover and heal himself.

“Their core members are gone after everything with Hades and the old Demon King regime. Their attacks against the major factions have all stopped. Thanks to you all, we’ve captured a couple of them alive, and they’re being interrogated as we speak. As for Cao Cao and the other Longinus users...they can’t be well off. They won’t be able to heal their wounds with Phoenix Tears or the Twilight Healing. According to Heaven, their Longinuses haven’t been transferred, so I’m guessing they’re still out there,” Azazel explained with a sigh.

Heracles and Jeanne were being held captive in the underworld, while the Longinus users Cao Cao, Georg, and Leonardo had been gravely wounded. However, their Longinuses hadn’t vanished yet.

Two versions of the same Longinus couldn’t exist at the same time. When a Longinus user died, the weapon was transferred to its next host to be reborn... Or something like that. The same went for my Sacred Gear... Basically, if there was no record of the Longinuses being transferred, then Cao Cao and his allies were likely still alive.

Azazel, however, didn’t seem wholly convinced.

“...Perhaps they’ve been stolen,” Rias suggested. “As injured as they were, it

wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility that someone tried to take them. After all, their organization seems heavily factional, with considerable internal strife."

Right, that couldn't be discounted, either. The Grigori had already developed the means to extract Sacred Gears intact and transfer them to others, and that technology might have passed to the Khaos Brigade. With Cao Cao, Georg, and Leonardo so injured, someone could have seized the rare chance to take the weapons by force.

Azazel nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I was thinking about that... I just hope we can avoid the worst-case scenario..."

His face was looking awfully grim. Just what was he imagining?

However, he chuckled a moment later. "Well, their biggest mistake was trying to mess with you all. You turned the tables on them. Your growth rate has been off the charts, so they were idiots to take you on. It's like when you get cursed for touching a god you should've left alone. Or maybe a demon in this case, huh?"

"Don't talk about us like we're hazardous materials, Teach! *They* attacked *us*! We just defended ourselves! Right, everyone?!" I said.

"Yep. We owe them big after what they did during the school trip."

"As Lord Michael's Ace, I'll give them a good thrashing if they come after us again!"

Xenovia and Irina nodded along. They got what I meant!

"...If they come back, we'll crush them. That's an ironclad rule for the Gremory Familia these days." Even Koneko had some scary words to offer, and I was grateful for them!

"I've been thinking lately that it might be good if they come back. It will help me rack up more points to be promoted to high-class level. Given our current members, stronger enemies will only be a plus." Rossweisse had come around pretty quickly! Nothing about powerful enemies was a plus, though!

Azazel guffawed at the responses. "That's the Gremory Familia for ya! You'll

be legends in no time. ‘Go after them, and you won’t get out alive.’ Yep, that’s what folks will say about you all before you know it.”

“We aren’t vengeful spirits, ” Rias grouched. “Please don’t talk about us like that.”

“Oh-ho-ho. But if they *do* attack us, we’ll have no choice but to destroy them,” Akeno added, looking for all the world like a true sadist!

“The Khaos Brigade is still active,” Azazel said. “It’s safe to say that their largest faction, the old Demon King regime, and their second-largest one, that band of heroes, have stalled after losing their leaders. And the traitors from the three great powers have been purged, at least mostly... But there are still those set against us. We should expect more enemies who’ve been lying low to emerge sooner or later.”

Right. Wasn’t there a group of mages somewhere in the mix? They weren’t going to attack us, were they? How unsettling! A Heavenly Dragon’s ability to draw strong foes was no joke!

Azazel turned his gaze to the corner of the room. “At the very least, we’ve got the Khaos Brigade’s old boss.”

We all followed Azazel’s gaze, turning to Ophis, who looked a little bemused. She’d followed me all the way to the clubroom.

“I am friends with Ddraig,” she said, her eyes meeting mine.

Whoa. I was honored hearing the Infinite Dragon say that, but still...

“I’m not Ddraig. I’ve got my own name—Issei Hyoudou... My friends just call me Issei.”

“I understand. Issei,” she answered without hesitation.

She was surprisingly quick on the uptake. Ophis had become strangely attached to me, following me wherever I went. Even at home, she would sit watching me in a corner of my room.

She tried to do everything exactly as the other girls did and was immensely curious, so everyone enjoyed being around her. She was practically always up to something.

I guess it was kind of like having a pet, like how cats and dogs adored their owners. Hold on, was I keeping the Ouroboros as a pet? Well, whatever.

“Yep, Issei. That’s it,” I answered.

Regardless of how we got here, the current situation was fine by me.

“Listen up, Issei,” Azazel began. “Even if you manage to get promoted to a high-class demon, you won’t be able to recruit Ophis into your Familia. You don’t need me to explain why, do you?”

“No. It’s because she isn’t really meant to be here, right?”

Ophis’s presence here was a secret from the wider public. Ordinarily, there was no way that she would be permitted to remain.

On top of that, the powers Cao Cao had stolen from her had been turned into a new Ophis who worked on behalf of the Khaos Brigade. They weren’t about to announce to the world that their leader abandoned them.

“She was the head of a bunch of terrorists,” Azazel continued. “She’s joined our side, but folks in the underworld won’t be happy if they know she’s here. That’s why we’ve used several layers of seals to hide her, making her look like just a slightly overpowered dragon. All that aside, deity-class beings aren’t allowed to be reincarnated via Evil Pieces. Even if it *is* possible for demigod Valkyries.”

Ophis had been left considerably weakened after Samael absorbed her powers, though she was still stronger than most.

More than anything else, she’d helped me in the dimensional void. That alone was enough for me to consider her my friend. If bad guys were out to get her, I’d keep her safe, no matter the cost.

Man, I still couldn’t believe I was a mid-level demon now. Getting used to it would take a little time, but I had to get my head on straight.

“I wonder what will happen to Ophis’s powers that the Khaos Brigade stole,” Kiba remarked.

My thoughts exactly. Samael had absorbed her powers, and Cao Cao had used them to create a new Ouroboros. But now the Hero Faction had collapsed.

“There are various opinions among those in the know,” Azazel replied. “The only thing we all agree on is that they will definitely continue to push ahead with their plan... Whatever their intentions, we should expect to see them try something soon. Be prepared.”

“*Be prepared*,” *huh?* I hung my head in disappointment. It sure sounded like we were about to find ourselves in hot water in no time...

“Being ready is all well and good,” Rias said, changing the subject. “But I want to focus on a few other matters for the time being. The first is Gasper.” Her gaze went to my underclassman.

He shuddered at becoming the center of attention. Was this about *that*? I hadn’t been there, so I didn’t know exactly what occurred. Apparently, Gasper had gone off the rails after being told that I was dead.

As a result, he’d unleashed tremendous power and overwhelmed Georg. You know, *that* Georg. The kid with the top-tier Longinus, the Dimension Lost, who was also a formidable mage. When I tried asking the others about it, they said it was an intense, awe-inspiring event...

Yet Gasper hadn’t changed. He was still the same weak-willed, cross-dressing kid.

“I didn’t mention it earlier because of everything else that was going on, but I think it’s time to ask them about those powers,” Rias stated.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We need to contact the Vladi family, the Vladi vampire clan. If we don’t get a grip on Gasper’s powers, they could have serious repercussions for him and for us.”

“...I—I’m sorry. I—I never knew I could do all that... I thought my eyes were the only problem...,” Gasper stammered.

He didn’t seem to recall what transpired while in that altered state. Did he possess a hidden power beyond his own knowledge? It certainly didn’t seem to be the work of his Sacred Gear.

Apparently, Rias suspected this was the actual reason Gasper was banished by

his family.

Azazel sighed. "Vampire society is going through considerable internal strife right now... Its people keep themselves cut off from the outside world. I hope they haven't been dragged into anything too serious."

Really? They were fighting themselves, too...? I would've preferred not to get involved, but leaving Gasper's new ability be was probably a bad idea. We needed to understand it before we could help him. That left little room for an alternative.

"S-sorry, everyone... B-but...I don't want much to do with...my family..." Gasper said, trailing off.

Evidently, he wasn't comfortable seeing them. Considering that they'd shunned and banished him, that was understandable. The poor guy was driven from his home and captured by a vampire hunter before Rias saved him.

I didn't want to pry, but clearly there was some serious mental baggage here.

"In addition to Gasper's issue, we have to be mindful of the mages, too, yes?" Akeno rested a hand on her chin.

"That's right." Rias nodded. "I expect one to offer a pact before too long."

"You mean like the kinds of contracts you see written about in books?" I asked.

A pact between a demon and mage? As in, the demon responded to the mage's summons? That kind of thing was pretty common in popular novels and the like.

"Yes," Rias answered. "Mages summon demons and forge pacts with them for a certain price. We simply lend them our powers as necessary. It's a little different from the way we grant wishes. Usually, demon summoning is pretty typical. Even younger demons are called upon.

—! *Th-then maybe...?*

"Are you saying we could all be contacted?" I asked.

Rias nodded.

Azazel stopped sipping his tea to elaborate. “Just the other day, the Council of Mages released an evaluation of all up-and-coming young demons to the magician world. They’re snapping them up as fast as they can. The Gremory Familia was particularly highly rated, so you’re all prime targets. There’s Rias, the sister of a Demon King; Issei, the Red Dragon Emperor; Kiba and his Holy Demon Swords; Akeno, daughter of Baraqueel and the Vestal of Holy Lightning; Xenovia with Durendal; and the rest of you all have valuable talents as well. They’ll be coming to you in droves. Make sure you choose the right mage, got it? If you tie yourself down with some chump, you’ll only lower your value.”

Seriously?! This was all part of a demon’s job? Even I could forge a pact with a mage?

He-he-he. I sure hoped a sexy witch decided to summon me.

While my mind had turned to erotic fantasies, I felt a tap at my shoulder. It was Rias.

“By the way, Issei,” she said, “do you remember what you promised me before the promotion exam? You still need to make good on that.”

Her cheeks turned slightly pink.

Yeah, I remembered perfectly.

“Let’s go on a date, Rias!” I exclaimed.

“I’d love to, my dearest Issei,” she responded, beaming.

Awesome! My first date with Rias. That was one thing I was honestly looking forward to. Everything else could wait.

The next moment, Xenovia stepped forward. “After the prez, go on a date with me, Issei!” she said, pointing to herself.

“N-no fair! Pick *me* next! I want to go on a date with Issei!” Irina demanded.

“Ngh! Me too! Pick me!”

“...And me.”

Even Asia and Koneko chimed in!

“Don’t forget me! I want to enjoy everything Japan has to offer!”

“...Me too.”

“It might be fun to go shopping with Issei, looking for new sales and bargains.”

Ravel, Ophis, and Rossweisse spoke up as well!

“Oh dear. Then I’ll need to have a *bed-top* date with him once he’s finished with everyone else.”

Seriously, Akeno?! That sure sounds tempting!

“Heh. Maybe I should invite him out, too, then, huh?”

“Hmm. Then so shall I.”

“Huh?! You’re all doing it? Th-then I will, too!”

Azazel, Kiba, and Gaspy, even?! Come on, guys, I’m not into men!

Rias grabbed me by the arms, pulling me into an embrace. “I’m first. Right, Issei?”

It looked like things were going to be tough from here on out, but at least I was content.

AFTERWORD

Our very own Issei has been saved by drawing legendary beings to his aid. He's a man who refuses to die, even if you kill him.

You may have realized that Kiba took the leading role this time around. Issei was absent for the first half, so that was unavoidable. Kiba always believed in him, never giving up. We should expect nothing less of a true heroine. Er, of a Gremory guy!

The men all put in tremendous effort. Kiba, Gasper, Sirzechs, Sairaorg, Vali, and Saji gave it their all. I started to question myself while writing this. *Ah man, the girls have taken the back seat...* But the male characters are popular, too, so maybe everything is still okay?

All the same, I feel guilty for denying the heroines some active roles. We'll be going back to the regular formula next time around.

I should apologize for not covering the calamity facing the underworld in any great detail. The main focus was on confirming Issei's survival and the drama about his resurrection, which pulled away from the giant monsters rampaging around the underworld. The Gremory Familia didn't fight them directly, after all. I tried to show what was going on through television broadcasts, but if I get a chance to do side stories featuring the different teams sent out to fight, I'd be very glad. Ultimately, volume twelve was more about the Gremory Familia's crisis than the underworld's.

Now to the different arcs of the narrative.

The first arc, *The Red Dragon Emperor's Awakening*, comprised Volumes 1 and 2. The second arc, *The Birth of the Breast Dragon Emperor*, was made up of Volumes 3 to 6. This third arc, *The Heroic Breast Dragon*, encompassed Volumes 7 through 12. The names are getting increasingly absurd.

Next up is the fourth arc, *The Legend of the Breast Dragon and His Lively*

Companions. Just like the title says, it will be all about the Breast Dragon and his merry band of friends, aka the Gremory Familia and their allies, going on an absolute rampage.

I've had an idea for the grand finale for quite a while (it will be published as a complete volume once all the various incidents are wrapped up), so all I have to do now is keep developing the setting and continue writing. Please bear with me while we develop the relationships with each heroine in more detail.

The fourth arc will delve more into the secret of Gasper's hidden powers.

In fact, I discussed the general direction and structure of the third arc with my editor way back around the time Volume 5 was released (about three years ago). The main events—Loki showing up, the Hero Faction attacking our protagonists on the school trip, the Rating Game match against Sairaorg, and the mystery of Issei's survival followed by his rebirth (with some short stories in between)—went almost exactly as planned.

What was *not* planned was Ophis becoming a member of the team. As it happened, when my editor and I saw Miyama-Zero's drawings of her for Volume 6, we fell instantly in love, and we decided to bring her over to the good side. She was never intended to be the final boss anyhow, so we thought we might as well keep her as a mascot for the Hyoudou family. Basically, that will be her role from now on while she gets comfortable in her corner.

While this was only the climax of the third arc, everyone's power levels have been completely overinflated. Sirzechs revealed his true form, Issei merged with the Great Red, and Vali vaporized Pluto in an instant, not to mention all the other crazy stuff that's been going on.

The last few volumes have hinted at power-ups or new possibilities for the other members, which we intend to explore in future books. These include Issei's White Dragon Emperor powers, more from Asia and Koneko, and Xenovia learning to fight with more than just brute force!

Issei's True Dragon mode, his supermassive Balance Breaker, is a special one-time-only power exclusively for this volume. I thought it would make for a fitting end to the arc and the second part of a back-to-back sequence with the last book.

Then, of course, we have Azazel's resignation as governor. In the end, he had to take the blame for everything that happened. But if you ask me, he's the one who's contributed most to Issei's development and that of the whole team.

Now for a little about the enemies.

This time around, Cao Cao was defeated by our hero, Issei. His habitual carelessness finally caught up with him. Georg likewise let his guard down and lost to Gasper. The two serve as good examples that nothing good comes from making enemies with the Gremory Familia. For a long time, I toyed with the idea that the Hero Faction, which fought in a uniquely human way, would lose precisely because that humanity carried inherent weaknesses. Who could have imagined they would be crushed by a toy?

The Khaos Brigade will need to undergo some reorganization from here on. The human-led Hero Faction tried to break away and do its own thing, but ultimately failed to anticipate the utter selfishness of gods and buddhas. No matter how far its members stretched themselves, they were still just humans. However, the Khaos Brigade serves as an antagonistic organization throughout the series, so you can expect it to reappear.

Also, while not explained in the text itself, the Annihilation Maker made use of a variant-type Balance Breaker called the Bandersnatch and Jabberwocky. Just like a top-tier Longinus, it is fully capable of destroying the world. The name might call to mind the Mirror Alice, used by Tsubaki Shinra, although there's no real connection.

There are still a few unresolved plotlines. Actually, the development of the wider setting has come to a bit of a standstill since Volume 7, as we've been delving deeper into the various forces. Mages and vampires will be featured in earnest, starting with the next book. Both groups have only been established in part thus far. I'll bring them into the story in a uniquely *High School DxD* way. The reason for all the mention of magic in the third arc was to set the scene for the fourth one.

Oh, and Kiba's sword master is none other than Souji Okita, captain of the first unit of the Shinsengumi. He's been around since the fourth volume, but I never had a chance to introduce him properly. He's finally made his appearance

this time. He's one of the best swordsmen in the underworld, and it took two knight pieces to recruit him. In fact, he's the reason that Rias first took an interest in Japan. Whenever someone brings up a weird fact about samurai, it's probably thanks to one of his lighthearted pranks.

I think I've mentioned this before, but while many new characters are popping up all over the place, most make only one-time appearances. Basically, you don't need to remember anyone except for our main cast. Ever since the second arc, the core formula is that our protagonists get caught up in the problems of one camp or another. While solving those issues, they bump into another team's boss.

Time for my thanks. I would like to express my gratitude to Miyama-Zero; my editor, H; and my sub-editor, S. All three have been invaluable for the novels and the anime adaptation.

I would also like to thank the manga artists Hiroji Mishima and Hiroichi and everyone in the *Dragon Age* editorial department. I look forward to continuing to work with you all.

Now then, the fourth arc will commence with the next book. At least, that's what I'd like to say. As it happens, however, Volume 13 will be a collection of short stories acting as a sort of intermission. We plan to include episodes that have appeared in the main story, such as Riser's return, along with more Magical Levia-tan. Look out for some fresh ones, too.

Oh, and there will be a special edition of Volume 13, complete with an anime Blu-ray disk. Think of it as a special thirteenth episode of the anime, concentrating on Issei and Rias's relationship after they start living together. In fact, I wrote these episodes specifically with that in mind, so please look forward to it!

Last but not least, I need to thank the director Tetsuya Yanagisawa, scriptwriter Takao Yoshioka, and the rest of the staff involved with the anime for a job well done. They had a very close understanding of the original work, and they really did make the best anime adaptation possible. I want to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. It's been an honor.

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Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Insert](#)
3. [Title Page](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [Epigraph](#)
6. [Life.-3: A Gremory with No Red Dragon Emperor](#)
7. [Life.-2: Buddies](#)
 1. [Dimensional Void](#)
 2. [Satan](#)
8. [Life.-1: The Young Demon Alliance!](#)
9. [Life.0: The Bust Dragon Emperor](#)
10. [Life.1: A Crimson Promise](#)
 1. [Azazel](#)
 2. [Hero...?](#)
 3. [New Life](#)
11. [Afterword](#)
12. [Yen Newsletter](#)