


A manga cover illustration featuring three characters. In the foreground, a girl with long blue hair and blue eyes, wearing a purple and gold military-style uniform, holds the hands of a girl with long red hair and pink eyes. The red-haired girl is wearing a light purple top with a white floral collar and blue overalls, and she has a surprised expression. In the background, a boy with green hair in a red shirt is seen from behind, looking over his shoulder. The background consists of pink and white diagonal stripes.

**THE
DEVIL
IS
A
PART-
TIMER!**

19

SATOSHI WAGAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY  **029 (ONIKU)**

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"Chiho, can you pick up the paper for me?"

"Okaaay."

It was morning when Chiho went out to the mailbox to pick up the day's newspaper. She was a bit surprised by how much heavier it was than usual.

"Oh, right, today's a holiday."

Because it was a holiday, the paper was packed with more ad flyers than usual. She struggled to keep them from falling as she went back to the living room, where she noticed one sticking out. She grabbed and unfolded it.

"What are you looking at?" Riho asked her enrapt daughter. "The want ads?"

"Yeah... I just realized that I've never really read one of these before. I didn't look at any other places before I applied to MgRonald, so..."

A pretty hefty number of companies were advertising in the holiday edition, fielding applicants for convenience stores, diners, fast-food chains, gas stations, and retail outlets, making bold promises of managerial training and full-time opportunities.

"Huh, it seems like a lot of people are looking for full-timers."

"Hmm?"

"I mean, Mr. Maou went through all that trouble only to fail out of his training. They said in the news that the ratio of applicants to openings is finally starting to go up and stuff. It must be kinda tough right now."

"Well, it's never not tough, really."

"And meanwhile, here you have these companies casually offering full-time positions like it's as easy as getting part-time work. A lot of them say you don't even need any experience or education."

"That's probably a sign of just how hard those jobs are. They have so much turnover that they have to keep advertising for new people. I'm sure it's backbreaking work. Plus, if they're that loose with the requirements, it could mean a lot of competition for the people who want to apply. But no matter what kind of job it is, if you just jump in without a second thought, it's unlikely to end well for either party."

"Yeah... You're probably right."

Taking a closer look at those ads and the high salaries they touted, Chiho noticed that the fine print included phrases such as *sample* and *model figures* and bandied around terms such as *production* volume and *commission*. She'd thought she had a grasp of such things, but upon further reflection, she realized they were actually pretty hard to define. And while any job naturally had employees who considered it their dream position, it was impossible to guess what life was like at a company with nothing to go on besides its ads.

"But...I don't think this is what he was looking for anyway."

The kind of full-time job Maou wanted probably wouldn't be found in the classified section. Maybe they would have been at one point, before he met Chiho. But now that he had a concrete goal in life and was working toward it, Chiho doubted he even looked at ads like these now.

So she pulled her eyes away from the more dubious job offers and took a peek at the rest of the wanted section.

"Oh, wow..."

One of the ads—in particular, the hourly wage it was promising—stuck out to her. It was for an educational center, and they were offering over 1,800 yen an hour, which she considered to be a pretty astounding figure. Emi had previously mentioned to Chiho what she earned at Dokodemo, but this was above even that. She thought the wage made sense given that the job required a college degree and the candidate would be helping middle and high school students plan for their futures.

"The difference is so stark..."

The test prep center was a unique case, but as far as she could tell, jobs that required applicants to at least be in college—or at a minimum, be over the age of eighteen—all offered wages a level above what high schoolers could expect. Maybe it didn't mean anything deep, but it told Chiho a lot about how society valued the leap between secondary and higher education.

"Well, you can think about that kind of work after you've gotten into college. Personally, I think it'd be easier to stick with what you're used to, but..."

"Oh, I'm not looking at it in detail or anything. Besides, there's no such thing as easy work, right?"

The Teenager Peeks into the Borders of the World



"Maybe not, but there are definitely jobs that are easier than others."

Grown-ups had a way of choosing their words carefully.

"Right, before I forget—I went ahead and got this for you, Chiho."

"Oh, thanks! I wanted to take this back today, so—"

"You really should have asked for time off or something so you could come back later. You'd have an easier time at a place you're more familiar with."

"I know, Mom," Chiho said, eluding her mother's idle talk as she took the paper dry-cleaner's bag her mom presented to her. Inside was the uniform for a place Chiho had cherished as her own for the past year.

"I just want to end it the right way."

Chiho took the handles on her bag, her mind made up.



SATOSHI WAGAHARA
ILLUSTRATED BY ■ 029 (ONIKU)

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Copyright

THE DEVIL IS A PART-TIMER!, Volume 19

SATOSHI WAGAHARA, ILLUSTRATION BY 029 (ONIKU) Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by 029 (oniku)

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PROLOGUE

In a corner of his cramped apartment, Maou looked at the empty cage on the floor and scowled.

“What’s the matter?” Libicocco asked, perhaps seeing something disquieting in the sight of Maou’s back turned to him.

Maou turned around, looking forlorn.

“I just mean...”

“Yes?”

“Before you came here, this whole apartment got renovated.”

“Yes.”

“And the reason we had to do that was because of the little bugger that was in here.”

“Right...”

“And, you know, this cage was part of the repair fees we paid.”

“...Ah.”

Libicocco had assumed he’d imagined the lonely air swirling about Maou.

“And we wound up *using* this cage for, like, barely any time at all. It’s such a waste of money, I think.”

“.....Ah.”

“And you know, the way the tatami mats are set up in this room, it’s only this corner that’s half a mat in size. It must’ve been a pain in the ass to renovate... but if it wasn’t for this, I bet I could’ve covered it all myself and not have had to grovel to Emi. You know? *Haaah...*”

“That sounds...rather tough.”

“It is. Money, man... It’s a cruel mistress. Remember that. The only way to make money is through daily, concerted effort.”

Until just the other day, the cage Maou stared at was occupied by Kinanna, an ancient Lenbrellebelve archdemon and the bearer of one of the few remaining relics from Satan, the Devil Overlord of ancient times. Right now, Kinanna was with Urushihara and Laila, on a recuperative journey in Ente Isla. As a native of the demon realms, and considering that he was destined to play a vital role in the battle against heaven to come, Kinanna would likely never see this cage again. It was no longer useful for storage space, or even for stacking stuff on top—a completely useless knickknack.

“Maybe we should buy a pet or something. Something Alas Ramus would like. This is essentially the only apartment in the building where pets are allowed, so...”

“A pet? Don’t they cost money?”

“You need to factor in the cost-effectiveness...but yeah, they cost money.”

For a relatively short amount of time, this room was home to a rather small cat. Recalling the expenses associated with him reminded Maou that, no, diving headlong into pet ownership wasn’t a great idea.

“I have some experience with cats, but you can’t cage a cat all day. Isn’t there *something* I could use this for?”

“As little time as I’ve spent in the human world, I’m not sure there is, no. Why not take it away and put a bookshelf or the like in there?”

“But that’s so *booooooriiiing!*”

“But, Your Demonic Highness, is now really the time to ruminate on this? Go finish up your breakfast. I need to clear the table.”

He had been willing to lend an obedient ear to Maou’s whining, but after several days of this, Libicocco had gained a pretty clear picture of the trends behind his conversational topics. Now he was managing his liege’s schedule even more efficiently than Ashiya at times.

“You work early today, my liege, so allow me to handle the laundry. Also,

we've run out of bathhouse tickets, so make sure to purchase some while you're out."

"...Sure."

"What about dinner? I'll set everything up for you, so feel free to eat whatever you like. I'm closing tonight."

"...Right."

On the low table in the center of the room was a plate of yakisoba in sauce with sunny-side-up fried eggs on top, a pretty heavy breakfast. Libicocco was a good half-head taller than Ashiya (himself pretty tall by local standards), and he was much more built than him. He thus complained that smaller meals left him unsatisfied, and so his cooking choices leaned toward whatever filled his stomach the best—a repertoire he had learned somewhere along the line. His cuisine was easy on the wallet, at least, but compared to the delicate, refined dishes Ashiya and Suzuno and Chiho preferred, it was all thick, heavy, and grew tiresome quickly. As a result, Maou had been cooking in shifts with Libicocco, out of a desire for something a bit less massive.

"I'm amazed you can eat all that first thing in the morning."

"I'm not even sure *this* will be enough."

"Seriously?"

Urushihara admittedly snacked on chips and things a lot, but overall he didn't have that big of an appetite. *This* meal was about three times the size of what he usually had.

"Well, not that I mind this, but..."

In his human form, Maou was a man in his twenties. If he wanted to pack it away, he definitely could.

"*Urp!* Thanks again for this."

"I'll do the dishes, so get ready to go, all right?"

"Sure... Sorry for the trouble." Maou stood up, talking with his mouth full. Taking his wallet and phone, he checked the weather forecast, brushed his teeth, picked up his bicycle key, and flew out the door.

“Off we go, Dullahan II! Time for another great day of work!”

Hearing his master make the bold declaration out the window—followed by the creaking sound of his bike as he pedaled off—Libicocco glanced at Kinanna’s cage in the corner of the room.

“I fear my liege has...too much time on his hands.”

It had been almost a month since Libicocco had taken up a job at the MgRonald franchise in front of Hatagaya Station. Watching Maou—whose daily routine was little different from his own—he was fairly sure his leader had better things to do than work there. Still, Maou claimed this job was important, so Libicocco didn’t argue.

“Well, I am sure he has his own thoughts about this...”

Libicocco cleared the table, his thoughts—in a way—more obedient to his master than Ashiya’s or Urushihara’s. He looked at the calendar. It was April 30.

“Two months until the war begins... How long do I have to keep doing this?”

**THE HERO
GETS
HER ACT
TOGETHER**



THE HERO GETS HER ACT TOGETHER

The moment he set foot on stable land, Urushihara's knees gave way, and he fell flat on his rear.

"Are you all right?" Laila inquired from next to him, not looking very concerned.

"No, I'm not all right, dude. I want to start fighting people. Anything to get this queasiness and irritation out of me."

Still blue in the face, Urushihara gave the boat behind him a reproachful glare.

The sailing journey from Welland Isa, the commercial port city on the far southern tip of Ente Isla's Northern Island, to Noza Quartus, the government hub on the northern end of the Central Continent, was no more than two days long. To Urushihara, who suffered from extreme motion sickness, it was like traversing the road to hell and back. He barely ate at all, and whatever he managed to choke down came right back up in short order. Going up on deck made the nausea simmer down a little, but the crew directed all passengers to stay in their rooms at night, and the pain kept him from sleeping much. The subsequent groaning affected Laila's sleep schedule as well, and the rings around her eyes were as clear as the irritation on her face.

"We'll be taking a stagecoach from here to the outskirts of Noza Quartus. Try to keep it together, okay?"

"I just wanna fly over! I don't care about the stability of the world or whatever any longer! A stagecoach? What year is this?! They have reclining *seats* in the other world!"

He was being ridiculous (since reclining seats wouldn't cure his motion sickness anyway), but in Urushihara's mind, he never wanted to see the inside of a moving vehicle again.

“Besides, if we take a stage, won’t that make it easier to track us? And who knows when Kinanna might start growing again. Even if it’s a risk, we need to get out of the city ASAP!”

Sitting there whining made Urushihara look like a spoiled child.

“...I don’t see any change to him yet.”

Laila opened the lid a little on the large wicker cage hanging from her arm, an accessory befitting the pet of some nobleman. She peered down at the ancient Lenbrellebelve demon inside, sleeping peacefully.

This demon, found by Maou and friends in the demon realms, was one generation older than even Camio, among the oldest classes of demons currently existing. He was a living witness to the history of the realms, or he would be if he hadn’t gone as senile as he was. It was generally agreed upon that the stone embedded in his throat was the Astral Gem, one of the Devil Overlord Satan’s relics—but Kinanna had been gravely wounded in battle deep underground in the demon realms, and he had clearly been unwell since.

Until now, they had been “keeping” him in Japan, where the lack of magic prevented him from absorbing any and growing to a Godzilla-type threat. But if the bearer of this relic should happen to die on them, there was no telling what kind of problems that would cause. So they decided to take the risk of more violent outbursts and return him to Ente Isla, so he could at least recover a bare minimum of magic force. But here they were now—on the Central Continent, the one region of Ente Isla where magic was at its most concentrated—and Kinanna showed no signs of recovery.

“Look, I just want to tell Ashiya what I’ve remembered as soon as I can. I think that’ll help all of us relax a little, so...all right?”

“Maybe, but flying’s still out of the question. We’d stick out too much.”

It wasn’t unheard of for Ente Islan sorcerers to fly long distances. But doing so still drew attention from anyone who witnessed it. And Laila and Urushihara didn’t *look* like sorcerers at all—Farfarello had procured them some clothing that would help them blend in on the Central Continent.

“ ... ”

But the listless bum seated by the harbor showed no interest in moving from the spot.

“I know, Lucifer! There’s a great way to keep you from getting carsick.”

“If it involves massaging the base of your thumb or eating mints or drinking soda in advance or other old wives’ tales, I don’t believe in any of it.”

“The thumb thing’s backed up by science, I think.”

“I don’t care what it’s backed up by, dude! That kind of ‘helpful hint’-type stuff doesn’t *work* on me! So what’s your amazing idea?”

“The big thing recently is to reduce the amount of light that enters your eyes. Just wearing sunglasses reduces carsickness by a lot, apparently.”

“Yeah? And where are we gonna get sunglasses around here? This is Ente Isla.”

“Right. So instead of that, I have another method.”

“Another one?”

“Yes,” Laila confidently asserted, “and *this* one’s pretty certain to work. You see, you never get motion sickness...if *you’re* the one doing the driving.”

Urushihara looked up at the incredibly self-assured woman and gave her the biggest wince he could manage.

“.....Huh?”

“W-wait! Waaaaaaait!”

“*What* are you doing...?” Looking drained, Urushihara pulled the reins to stop his horse. Turning around, he saw Laila a fairly long distance behind him, fervently petting the neck of her own mount as it stood motionless. “How many times does that make it? We’re never gonna get anywhere if you act like this.”

“B-but I’m not even doing anything, and it’s just not *moving*!”

“‘I’m not even doing anything’ is probably the least believable thing you can utter in any language, dudette.”

With a well-versed tug of the reins, Urushihara turned and directed his horse over to Laila.

“This is so ridiculous! I come from a farming family! I took care of all *kinds* of livestock! So why can someone like *you* who lies around and browses the Net all day beat *me* at riding?!” she exclaimed.

“Not only is that slander, but your comparison ain’t even valid.”

Urushihara looked unaffected as he sidled up to Laila’s horse, took the reins from her hand, and gave them a light flick. The horse shook its head, a tad disgruntled, but still quietly began to walk in unison with Urushihara’s.

“Hey, hang on to the reins.”

“Ugh... This is so humiliating.”

“You’re pulling too hard. You know why the reins are connected to the bit in its mouth? Because they’re sensitive there. So if you pull too hard, it hurts, and then they’ll have no idea *what* you’re trying to do. Whoa, don’t slouch forward like that. It’ll mess up the position of your hands, and you’ll start pulling again. Keep it straight.”

Laila likely never imagined in her life that someone like Urushihara would be warning her to keep her back straight. The humiliation and embarrassment made her tremble as she looked at him, and the way he was now expertly handling two sets of reins.

“S-so why are you some kind of equestrian savant? I really doubt Satan and Alciel ever taught you...”

Her suggestion for avoiding motion sickness was to have Urushihara do the driving himself. And for two people in Ente Isla seeking long-distance transport, a packhorse was your best (and only) bet. But then something unexpected happened: Despite making the suggestion in the first place, Laila was utterly incapable of handling horses. Meanwhile, Urushihara had no problems at all, even with the carrying pole they had in place to keep Kinanna from being too shaken by the ride. He had real talent, while Laila faced difficulty getting on its back, getting it to walk, and getting it to *keep* walking. Any confidence she had was now shattered.

“I learned it after we invaded the Western Island. Not for traveling or transporting goods or anything but, you know, for fun.”

He flashed a clearly malicious smile at his fellow angel. It made her wince.

“For fun how?”

“Well, I could tell you, but I’m sure it’d make Emilia and Bell yell at me. You know, the Western Island is the big stronghold of the Church, right?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“And there’s a lot of myths about angels or heroes or whatever riding in on majestic steeds and saving humanity. So sometimes I’d go riding in someplace we invaded and spread my wings, and... You know, I look pretty human, right? The sight of a guy with wings on a horse running in just *floors* them. They didn’t even notice the wings were black. It was all like ‘ohhh, an angel’s come to save us!’”

“...All right. Spare me the details. I can figure out the rest.”

“It was so much fun to smash dudes like that up...”

“I *told* you to spare me the details.”

In so many words, Urushihara had learned horsemanship to harass and torment the populace of the Western Island for laughs.

“Why do you need a horse, though?” she asked. “You can pretend to be an angel any day without one.”

“Oh, with the white wings I don’t have?”

“Well, no...”

“You know how grown-ups always say that playing is a waste of time? But it’s fun *because* it’s a waste. Enjoying pointless stuff like that is the kind of spice we all need in our lives. If anyone tells you you’re wasting your life with something, that means they’re missing something they *need* in their lives. I really feel for people like that. Playing around is fun *because* it’s pointless. And right now...”

Urushihara gave Laila a side glance, clearly enjoying this.

“Moments where I get to stand on top of someone who treats me like an idiot all the time are *such* a rush. You never know when something you learn helps you out down the line, y’know? But maybe someone like you, who’s no good at

anything but living forever, wouldn't get that."

He was playing innocent about the way he lived his own life for the time being, but Laila had absolutely nothing to counter with.

"Still, at this pace, I think we'll get there faster than walking or taking a stage."

"It's rare for someone as lazy as you to be in a hurry. Is what you need to tell him that important?"

"Well, it's not like it'll massively impact our future plans or anything. But if we *do* know it, then if push comes to shove, it'll be a little easier to pick up the pieces, you know? I'm gonna have to dredge up some regrettable things from my past, but..."

"...I'm kind of surprised."

"About what?"

"I don't know what 'regrettable thing' this is, but it's not something you'd *want* to talk about if you could avoid it, right?"

"Yeah."

"But you're still diligent enough to hurry up with this. It's kinda out of character for you."

"I get it. You're picking on me, aren't you?" Urushihara gave this an annoyed chortle then looked upward. "If this were just about Maou or Ashiya or Emilia, I wouldn't be so serious about it. But Alas Ramus is involved, y'know? And Acieth and Erone, too, I guess. Depending on the situation, they all could be stronger than Maou or Emilia. We don't wanna mess up how we handle them, all right? And turn them against us."

"Right, true..."

"And it doesn't exactly feel good to see a kid you know crying. It's a pain in the ass. I'm not generally in the habit of trying to make kids cry, Alas Ramus in particular. So, you know, if I do this, it'll make assorted things easier later."

His roundabout logic didn't make him too comprehensible, but Laila still grasped that Urushihara was actually lifting a finger for Alas Ramus's sake. It made her eyes widen in surprise.

“If I could ask, what’s happened to you in the past year?”

“Huh?”

“It wasn’t that long ago when you destroyed Sasazuka Station and sent the Shuto Expressway crashing down, was it? And before that, you were breaking everything that wasn’t nailed down in Ente Isla and the demon realms... What did one year of living in Sasazuka change in you?” she asked.

Urushihara looked even more puzzled about the question than Laila. He replied, “If you find a new restaurant and you like their food, wouldn’t you wanna keep going back?”

“...What?”

“The Net’s fun. Video games are fun. Manga’s fun. And Maou pays for everything. If I kept destroying things, I wouldn’t get any of that. So I need to protect this environment, to make sure I can keep profiting from it. Right?”

“I think there’s room for debate over whether one can call Satan’s enabling something worth protecting.”

“And if I make Alas Ramus sad, he yells at me about it. Compared to that, dredging up some bad memories is easy.”

The fact that Urushihara placed embarrassing events from thousands of years ago and an Internet environment well behind modern times on the scales and chose the Net anyway was...strange. Acceptable, perhaps, but strange.

“Well...if you’re fine with that, so am I.” She gave a light huff.

“I hate it when you say that. Are you trying to rile me?”

“You are *such* a pain to deal with!”

“Like you aren’t.” Urushihara smiled spitefully, then let out a sigh. “But I don’t think I’m gonna be sick now, so we can take our time. Judging by things on the Northern Island, the Church isn’t in any shape to move with much speed right now, so we don’t need to keep a breakneck pace.”

“Didn’t you say a bit ago that we needed to hurry for Kinanna’s sake?”

“Oh, he’s fine. If he looks about to die, just have him eat a twig or some grass

or whatever. He chomped on our apartment, and it was no biggie, so he'll live."

"Ugh, can you be *serious* about this?!"

Urushihara seemed almost recklessly carefree, but by this point, they were far away from the busiest part of Noza Quartus, and they were in no shape to dispose of their horses now. All Laila could do was go where they took her. And as long as Dhin Dhem Wurs could function as their bulwark in the Northern Island, there was no need for extreme haste. As a matter of fact, Maou had his shift schedule locked in for the next three weeks from now, just like always.

But the longer a stability like this lasts, the more intense the effect when change finally comes.



Spring was a time of encounters and separations. Four months had passed since the new year, and their first steps toward declaring war against the "god" of Ente Isla.

Over in Japan, Chiho Sasaki had announced her departure from the Hatagaya MgRonald in order to focus on her duties as a student. Mayumi Kisaki, the store manager who'd served as a guide and inspiration to the Hero and Devil King of another world, had also been transferred by the company, leaving the site under the direction of new boss Kotomi Iwaki. And under the Iwaki administration, in an attempt to address the holes in the staff list, Malebranche chieftain Libicocco had stepped in like a thunderbolt.

Back when Maou and Ashiya had rescued Emi from her confinement in the Eastern Island, they'd launched a plan to gradually relocate the demons of their realms to Ente Isla. As he prepared for the battle against heaven, Ashiya had also been forging clandestine agreements with several major hitters in Ente Isla's geopolitical scene—including the Azure Emperor of Efzahan, the most powerful man on the Eastern Island; Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs, the main spiritual support of the Northern Island; and Warrior Chief Rajid Rahs Rian of Vashrahma, the military state that served as the keystone of the Southern Island. The project to make a MgRonald crewmember out of Libicocco had a hidden motive to it—it served as a test case for the demons who'd soon be trying to integrate into human society.

Emi had no outward opposition to this, although the idea of Libicocco working part-time in Japan made her notably anxious. Maou wanted to get the battle with Ente Isla's heaven over with fast, but there was still no guess how things would turn out over there. With the Church's declaration of a "Crusade"—a long-range deployment of their knightly forces—on the Central Continent, the fateful moment of conflict was drawing ever closer. All this, even as Emi and her friends had an encounter that made them reconsider just how powerful the angels really were.

With all of that—plus the ailing state of Kinanna, the ancient demon bearing one of the Devil Overlord's relics and a key element of the upcoming invasion of heaven—the murmur of distressing news had grown into a full-throated chorus. Everyone had a common interest in avoiding casualties, both in Ente Isla and among the Devil King's Army. They needed to address, and solve, these anxieties at once—and to gain a clearer picture of the now-blurred makeup of the angelic forces, Urushihara and Laila had taken a route through the Northern Island to bring Kinanna to Devil's Castle.

In the meantime, thanks to some intense motion sickness on the boat from Noza Quartus to Welland Isa, Urushihara had recovered some of his older memories—memories that, he claimed, were highly relevant to the relics of the Devil Overlord Satan.



Chiho heaved a deep sigh under the warm spring sun.

Her shirt, her skirt, and her visor were neatly stacked up in the dry-cleaning bag. She gave it a light squeeze as she passed by the automatic doors she had gone through countless times.

"Welcome! ...Oh."

The deep-throated voice from behind the counter echoed toward the entrance, as its owner nodded his greetings to her. Chiho walked in, seeming to savor every step she took along the well-polished floor, then looked up at the "new guy" in front of (and above) her, looking mightily constricted in his red crew shirt.

"Is Ms. Iwaki here?"

“Yes, she’s in her office.”

“Ah.”

Chiho nodded then looked around her, a little concerned.

“What’s wrong? You know where the staff room is.”

“Oh, no, um, I do, but...”

Chiho smiled a little at the new guy’s slightly arrogant demeanor. She took a peek at the calendar deeper in the kitchen, just barely visible from the counter.

“You know, I’m not on the staff starting today, so I don’t want to just barge in.”

“...You actually care about stupid nonsense like that?”

The girl seemed to expect this reply from the start. “It’s important to me, Libicocco,” she replied, giving him an exaggerated shrug. The page-a-day calendar indicated today was May 1. As of yesterday, April 30, Chiho had departed the crew of the MgRonald at Hatagaya Station.

“I’ve never quit a job before. I can’t really ask my coworkers about this, so I’m not sure how to go about it.”

“It’s not like anything’s changed between yesterday and today. They didn’t build a barrier over the staff room.”

“In the human world, you know, the barriers are all in your mind... Ah!”

Just then, Chiho noticed Iwaki herself leaving her office, through the very same door Chiho had used without a passing thought until yesterday.

“Oh, there she is! Sorry!”

With a bow to Libicocco, Chiho jogged up to Iwaki. They exchanged a few words, then Chiho disappeared into the staff room, invited by her ex-boss.

“I don’t understand,” Libicocco said as he watched, doubtful of the whole procedure. Then:

“Welcome!!”

Reacting to the sound of the automatic doors, he showed off his smile—an

affable smile despite his scary face, one that now came naturally after just over three weeks of training—to the next customer.

“All right. Thanks for taking these back.”

Iwaki gave Chiho’s returned uniform a quick once-over and nodded.

“But I didn’t think you’d provide it right on the first. You could’ve waited until after the holiday weekend.”

“Well, what if you brought someone else in right after me, and you didn’t have a uniform for her? I heard you couldn’t get Mr. Libicocco on immediately because you didn’t have his size.”

“Oh, Libby’s kind of an exception. You’ll never find a MgRonald location that has *his* size in stock.”

With a smile, Iwaki placed the uniform (bag and all) above the lockers. This made Chiho raise an eyebrow; she’d expected her to put it on a shelf or in a locker. Iwaki gave her a wry look in response.

“I’ll keep it for you, Sasaki,” she said softly.

“Huh?”

“Once you’re accepted and get used to things in college, come on back for us, okay?”

Grasping the woman’s intention, Chiho smiled a bit. “I’d love to,” she replied, “if I can. But I heard that there’s a lot of good-paying jobs available once you’re college age, and besides, I already started going to a test-prep academy last week. I’m gonna be so busy studying, I might forget all the procedures here.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll be just fine, Sasaki. I’m not going to ask you to go through training all over again. You’d start from the get-go as a Class A crewmember!”

Her tone was light and friendly, but Iwaki was clearly going to miss Chiho’s presence. “Oh, right! Can you take this with you?”

Iwaki produced Chiho’s MgRonald Barista certification, with CHIHO SASAKI engraved on it and everything. This and the other certifications were put on display by the counter in the MgCafé space; Iwaki must have taken it down for her. Chiho had totally forgotten about it, but seeing her name engraved on this

official-looking framed document made the past year of work experiences flash before her eyes, warming her heart.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. After all, it’s yours.”

Chiho had cleaned them all regularly, but there was still a layer of dust on the top of the frame. Even that gave her warm fuzzies as she put it in her bag. A MgRonald Barista was just an internal title, something any crewmember could earn with a few days of basic class instruction—but to Chiho, this title was a decisive step toward the future, after a year that had brought dizzying changes.

She took a deep breath, straightened her back, and bowed. “It’s been a great year here. Thanks again for everything.”

“No, thank *you*...not that I really can, given how new I am. Still, you, and everything you’ve left here, are a huge asset to this location. You can come back to visit us anytime you like...and, of course, we’d love to have you join the team again.”

“I’ll be sure to consider it.”

This quite grown-up conversation was—in a very real way, in her mind—her last piece of work for the year she’d just experienced.

Back at home, Chiho placed the framed certificate in a prominent position on her work desk, took a deep breath, and gazed at her tidy workspace.

Starting today, this desk would be her battlefield. Not the apartment where the Devil King and his minions dwelled; not the fast-food chain she worked alongside the Devil King and Hero at; not some other world whose lands were shaped like a holy cross. It was her last year of high school here in Japan, and this was where she’d be waging her own battles—and, of course, there was nothing unusual about someone her age stepping up and firming her resolve along these lines.

She exhaled sharply, steeling herself, and took a test-prep textbook out from a drawer in her desk. She had joined this academy just before they worked out what her final day at work would be—but by the standards of Japan, beginning to prepare for college for *real* in May of your last high school year was a pretty

slow start. Even if her test scores and grades were pretty good at school, if she wanted to believe that gave her an advantage in college entrance exams, then waiting this long was a trap. In Chiho's case in particular, the grown-ups in her life had placed a lot of expectations on her, all but demanding a promise, and she had a strong desire to live up to that.

So she couldn't be too casual about this—and it meant she had to deliberately tone down her relationships with the people of Ente Isla, people she loved and cherished. It would be a grueling battle, but now was no time for complaints. Not even the titans of the Devil King's Army and the Hero's own companions knew very much about the college admissions system of Japan. She couldn't rely on anyone else. With the McDonald at Hatagaya Station behind her, Chiho was now facing up to the battle for her continued education.

“...!”

The phone in her bag rang. It snapped her out of her thoughts, but she couldn't yell at the caller about it. Hurriedly opening up the pink flip phone, she found a highly unexpected name on the screen—someone who would normally want to avoid contact with her at all costs. But it was still a phone call, like any other in Japan. It wasn't an Idea Link, the long-range magic she used regularly to speak with friends in other worlds. Whoever had placed this call was physically in Japan right now.

“Hello? Suzuno? What's up? Are you in Japan right now?”

Suzuno Kamazuki, high-level cleric for the most widely practiced religion in Ente Isla, was forced by the responsibilities of her position to support Chiho and the Devil King's Army from the outside. She should have been in Sankt Ignoreido right now, the headquarters of Ente Isla's Church. Suzuno and the Devil King's Army should keep any communication to a minimum, to keep the people of Ente Isla from discovering that army's true mission.

Everyone involved was aware of this. Chiho had decided to stay hands-off with the army until things had settled a bit on the exam-prep front, and even when she had a shift with Maou or Emi during her final days on the job, she made it a point not to discuss Ente Isla. That was why, even after Libicocco came along and Urushihara, Laila, and Kinanna had been off in Ente Isla for

several weeks, she had no idea what they were doing or how much of it was being fed back to Maou.

Suzuno was supposed to be in Ente Isla, keeping the Church from exposing them, and here she was placing phone calls to Chiho in Japan. Chiho had zero expectation of good news.

“Is something bad going on in Ente Isla...?”

“Yes. Something bad, indeed.”

The voice was listless; Chiho could easily imagine a pale-faced Suzuno on the other side of it.

“Bad...? Did something happen to Devil’s Castle?! Or did Urushihara run into some kind of trouble?! Did Kinanna eat Laila or something?!”

Suzuno didn’t have the energy to protest Chiho’s poor impression of the angels.

“No, um, it actually relates to me.”

Despite every potential terrifying scenario Chiho could think of, Suzuno’s reply came as an unexpected surprise.

“I have done nothing to deserve this, but I have been promoted.”

“...Pardon?”

“I have been promoted. Me.”

“Huh? Promoted? What are you talking about, Suzuno? Can you explain things a bit more... Like, also, where are you?”

“At the apartment. Room 202.”

The response was the same as always—except it shouldn’t have been the same as always. It made Chiho feel dizzy.

“I need to return to Ente Isla promptly, but I thought it prudent to tell someone about this directly, However, I fear the Devil King and Emilia might be at work presently, so—I apologize, Chiho, I know you have your studies to attend to...”

Suzuno sounded fairly frantic.

“That’s fine! I’m not doing anything in particular right this minute or anything! But what happened? Take a deep breath and tell me everything!”

It was virtually the first time Chiho had seen Suzuno this out of sorts. She wasn’t sure how to address this, but in another moment, she had her answer.

“I’m becoming an Archbishop...”

Chiho spent a few seconds chewing over the term. Then she realized just how weighty this was.

“What?!” she shouted from the pit of her stomach. “Archbishop? You mean of the whole Church?! Like, part of the group of six at the very top?!”

“Yes... Exactly.”

After a tumultuous year, the six Archbishops, who had the final say in all Church affairs, were currently faced with two empty seats. Over on Ente Isla, the “Crusade”—the large-scale Church deployment to defeat the evil teeming around the Devil’s Castle on the Central Continent—was a hairbreadth away from deploying. This deployment needed to be delayed as much as possible to aid Chiho and the rest of the Devil King’s Army, and Suzuno was supposed to be aiding in that sabotage effort. However, while it would be one thing if her delay tactics were exposed and she were punished for it, it was quite another to be awarded a promotion. Becoming one of the most powerful people in the Church meant her actions would be more restricted than ever before, prying eyes upon her at essentially all times. It was a huge blow to the Devil King’s Army.

But even with that in mind, Suzuno’s reaction seemed odd. Chiho knew her to be a talented fighter, a gifted tactician, and a shrewd politician. The Suzuno she knew would use this new position to turn the tables and direct Emeralda and Rumack to carry out some new strategy for her. If she was this frazzled about it, Chiho thought, the issue must be about more than this very sudden personnel change.

“I’ll head out for your apartment right now. Can you wait there a bit?”

“...All right. I am unsure I can fully grasp this situation alone, so...”

Sensing something ominous, Chiho got her things back together and flew back

out the door. She could clearly picture, for some reason, the normally cold and dignified Suzuno on her knees in her darkened room, dejected and discouraged. If she didn't come over right now, what kind of friend was she?

But as Chiho ran along, the monologue that came across through the phone only added to the chaotic confusion.

"And if only that were all... I have also been appointed the commander of the upcoming Crusade."

".....Huh?"

Suzuno commanding the Crusade. In other words, before very long, she'd be engaging in open warfare against the Devil King's Army, led by Ashiya, right on the Central Continent. Now Chiho realized it—this wasn't just some personal drama carried out on the corridor of Villa Rosa Sasazuka; this was something that could cost thousands of lives over in the lands of Ente Isla. She shook her head to stave off the panic.

"...What will we do?"

"I cannot say," Suzuno replied with a sigh, and Chiho had nothing to answer her with.



"Why don't you just ignore your orders, then?" Maou bluntly stated, looking down at a Suzuno who appeared even smaller than usual.

"...My liege, don't you find that a bit irresponsible?"

This fairly understandable retort was lodged by Libicocco, fresh from his work shift.

"Besides, we all know right now that there's no god at all on Ente Isla's side," Maou continued. "No matter what the Church or anyone says."

"...Your Demonic Highness, I don't think that's how religion really works."

"No, but... I mean, what's the big deal if Suzuno gets a promotion at this point?"

"...I imagine it leads to problems we don't have an insight into quite yet."

“Libicocco’s been talking a lot more sense than you lately,” jabbed Emi.

Suzuno sounded just as dejected as she looked. “If I were able to refuse the position, I would. But there is a yawning gap between the responsibilities of an Archbishop and those of a mere bishop.”

Chiho asked, “But why did you wind up promoted in the first place? You didn’t do anything in particular, did you?”

In another time, this sounded like a question Chiho would throw in Urushihara’s direction. But it was the truth, and Suzuno lightly nodded at it.

“Hmm...things have gone a little *too* well, you could say.”

As she explained, after her return to the Church headquarters, she had sincerely devoted herself—too sincerely, as it turned out—to preparing for the Crusade, resulting in delays across the board for the entire project. She had made sure there was a thorough consensus on everything, held multiple Reconciliation Panel meetings, and even set off on journeys to assorted holy sites, claiming to seek guidance from theologians across the continent, even if it meant the panel meets had to be stopped for days on end. That, and all the personnel she had commandeered from all over, claiming it to be part of the PR effort for the Church’s followers.

The subsequent delays were such that one day Cervantes Reberiz, de facto leader of the Archbishops, called her into his office. She had assumed it was to upbraid her on all the stalling, mentally preparing a passionate speech about how all of her work was strictly necessary for this grand mission ahead, but instead she was greeted with a highly unusual ordination to the post of Archbishop.



“But there’s still four other Archbishops, aren’t there?” Emi asked dourly. “I think the other three besides Cervantes are all pretty ancient, but... Do you think they suspected you or something? Did they have their eyes on you?”

Chiho tried to picture the other Archbishops engaging in workplace harassment with Suzuno in some way. But Suzuno denied it.

“I told you...it has all gone *too* well. How to put it? My underground connections with the Devil King’s Army, my deceitful secret meetings with Chief Wurs—none of that has been exposed to anyone. That is why...”

Her eyes turned to a faraway point in the air.

“Archbishop Cesar Quaranta was sent to the city of Welland Isa the other day. His mission was to negotiate for the Church to establish a large base for Crusade goods and personnel on the Northern Island. Chief Wurs came to meet with him, and, well, what she had to say did not portend good things for our side.”

Wurs, of course, had signed a pact with the Devil King’s Army to ensure she’d never give the Church any encouraging news. But beyond that, problems arose. Cesar sensed that negotiations could potentially drag on for a while, but his own business was also weighing heavily upon him. If he was stuck dealing with *this* issue indefinitely, it’d leave him dealing with other, non-logistics-related issues that he really didn’t want to be bothered with. They needed more staff on duty, he concluded, and so the four Archbishops deliberated over whom to add to their cloister—and this was the result.

“Archbishop Cervantes said so himself. He stated that all this delay in Reconciliation Panel preparations and excessive groundwork was due to me being unable to pull enough rank as bishop.”

Suzuno’s eyes, bereft of light, stared down at the tatami floor of Room 202.

“But a bishop’s pretty high up, isn’t it?”

She nodded at Emi’s question, sighing. “It is. But there are ranks within the bishopric as well.”

Suzuno Kamazuki—Crestia Bell—was an ordained bishop and leader of the

Reconciliation Panel. A rank-and-file Church bureaucrat she certainly was not. But in practice, her bishop title was an honorific one, because she did not have a cathedral of her own to preside over. A cathedral—a bishop’s “diocese,” the part of Church land they held direct jurisdiction over—was run by a parish bishop, and compared to someone like Suzuno with a bishop’s title and nothing else, there was a clear pecking order in place.

“In addition, there are more than a few people in the Church bureaucracy who do not view the Reconciliation Panel in a friendly light. It used to be the Council of Inquisitors, which led to a great deal of spite from a humanist perspective. And since the Panel was convened to root out corruption among our clerical ranks... Well, more than a few among our flock see us as troublemakers.”

“Funny how the Church is supposed to be this standard-bearer for human morals,” Maou tossed out, “but they hate their own internal police like that. Contradiction much?”

Suzuno chuckled at this casual diss of the entire human race.

“So I suppose the four Archbishops voted unanimously to kick me upstairs, as it were, to eliminate annoyances in several different ways... And while the decision’s not official as of yet, I’ve already been granted all the powers of the office, so essentially, I have been tasked to throw my weight around and get things done more quickly.”

Cesar had been talking with Suzuno as well.

She had close relations with many officials from Saint Aile, personnel who would no doubt play a major role in this Crusade. Her Archbishop rank would eliminate a lot of the red tape gumming up diplomatic negotiations; her presence would no doubt change the attitudes of many of their foreign partners. Considering her past work at the Reconciliation Panel and Council of Inquisitors, she seemed suited to serve as the Archbishop’s specialist in diplomacy and missionary activity—someone who could pick up where Olba Meyer had left off.

Thus, this appointment had a symbolic aspect. The exceptional rise of a young cleric under Olba’s service was a good way to preserve the honor of a Church

heavily damaged by the ex-Archbishop's crimes, while also lending a better impression to the Reconciliation Panel and its activities.

It also meant that the Northern Island sea route was even more vital to the Crusade than before. Saint Aile had been in contact with the Chief Herder of the land regarding the miracle that occurred during their *zirga*, the land's most important political gathering. They had liked what they heard, and now wanted Suzuno's power and connections to help negotiations between Chief Wurs and Saint Aile's staff.

This was the nature of Cesar's proposal, and the other Archbishops—Cervantes, Mauro, and Verdigris—rubber-stamped it without comment.

“...”

“Huh...?”

“...That...”

“That's a sad story.”

Maou, Chiho, Emi, and Libicocco stared agape at Suzuno's confession. Cesar's scheme, as far as everyone in the room was concerned, came far too late to matter.

“...How am I going to face up to Lady Emeralda and General Rumack now?”

From this point forward, Suzuno would represent the Church, running hither and yon to deal with Crusade details. She would thus have to confer with Emeralda and Wurs as part of her official responsibilities—but thanks to being *too* personally friendly with all of them for so long...

“I am sure they will have their complaints for me... Lady Emeralda will tease me, no doubt, for how clumsily I conducted myself. The mere thought depresses me.”

There was no denying that. But was it really worth getting this depressed about?

“Ah...”

Suddenly, something dawned upon Chiho.

“Um, Suzuno, where did you come here *from*?”

“...Haaah.”

She paused for a moment.

“From the Goat Pasture.”

That told Chiho everything she needed to know. “So have you already talked to Wurs...?”

“I never thought someone could bring me to tears with their voice at *my* age.”

“...Oh.”

The Goat Pasture was in Phiyenci, the main city and spiritual center of the Northern Island. Suzuno had already met with Chief Dhin Dhem Wurs over there, and the results had been, to say the least, humbling. In fact, her going to the Northern Island was likely the cover story for her as she licked her wounds here in Japan.

“When do you have to go back?”

“By tonight... I have taken ill and sought refuge in government lodging, is what has been reported. But I will need to report back to headquarters tomorrow. There are assorted procedures and ceremonies for my ordainment.”

She couldn't have looked less enthusiastic about returning home. But she had no choice.

“Well, it's still a little early today, but why don't we have some udon noodles? Then we can think about what to do over there!”

“...All right.”

Then Maou, Emi, and Libicocco watched as Suzuno followed Chiho outside, shuffling along like a duckling imprinted on its mother. They watched, then gave each other looks.

“...Well, a little food and vent session, I suppose?”

“I get it, but I don't think a bowl of noodles is gonna be enough to help her recover from *this*...”

Maou and the others understood just how downtrodden Suzuno was. All

three of them glanced at the calendar. It was May 1. Two months remained until July, and the Devil's Castle—driven trip to the moon.

"We might be in trouble here."



"Hey, Emeraldalda, did you hear?"

"...Oh, about Bell? Yes, of cooourse I have..."

At the head office of the Holy Magic Administrative Institute, located in the Saint Aile capital of Ereniem, Emeraldalda was pouting at the sight of Hazel Rumack charging inside.

"Well, *now* what?!"

"Yesss, this is about the woorst thing I could think of..."

Emeraldalda scrunched up her small face as best she could, head hung low.

"Could it be Crestia Bell was coerced into this? Because she has connections with us, or with the Devil King?"

Rumack's department couldn't be blamed for making that conclusion. But Emeraldalda shook her head.

"An ordination to Archbishop isn't the kind of event you can throw around for thaaat sort of reason. There are scooores of bishops and cardinals waiting their turn for that role, and she was an honorary bishop originally. Based on precedent, there's no waaay she'd normally be an Archbiiishop."

"The news is supposed to be private, but the whole nation's in a state of confusion. Was she born in Saint Aile?"

"I've never aaasked, and there's nothing in the records about her. I should have popped the question when I had the chaaance. Being in the Council of Inquisitors, I'm sure her personal history's been eraaased to some extent."

The six Archbishops of the Church essentially served the role of king in the Western Island...or perhaps something even more powerful. That meant the origins, and birth nation, of a new Archbishop was something of utmost importance to Church followers. The late Robertio Igua Valentia came from a small nation in the Western Island, and his tale—the story of a backwater cleric

who rose to become one of the most powerful men in the world—had already become an ensconced part of Church lore. Cervantes, Verdigris, Cesar, Mauro, and even Olba were feted as great men in their respective homelands, some of which even made the date of their native son's ordainment a national holiday.

"If I had to guess, Cervaaantes and the rest really *are* serious about this Crusaaade."

"...Serious, you say?"

"A religious leader needs a good sense for the politics and economy of the secular woorld, after all. They may be pious in their heaaarts, but they may not be extremists, all 'God above all,' like some of the lower-end cleerics might be."

"No, I'm sure you're right. Personally, I think Cervantes would be far more useful as a knight captain than an Archbishop."

"But I imaaagine that holy dreeeam they all had must've shocked them to the cooore. It set their spiiiritual sides aflame again, these pure blue cryystals that the vagaries of Church politics had dulled over tiime."

Emeralda was supposed to be a religious woman in her own right. She didn't seem too interested in giving the Church higher-ups their due.

"So I thiiink Bell's ordination is part of that new mooovement. I mean, to our believers and the general public, it's the epic tale of heeroes rising up to the challenge, isn't it?"

She placed both elbows on her desk, looking distracted.

"So they've recognized her diplomacy and missionary efforts, on the Council and on the Paaanel... They appointed her based on her taaalents, not on whether she's an honorary or parish biiishop...and now this young, beautiful new Archbishop is going to lead the largest Crusaaade in history... Isn't it the most moooving piece of mythology you ever heeheard of? They're serious about this, deaaadly serious. They want to use this Crusaaade to take over the whole world."

Although they had the mandate of their religion covering it up, if you scoped out the scene impartially from above, this was nothing less than a Western

Island–led invasion of the Central Continent. Being called a “Crusade,” however, meant the average man on the street didn’t think this was about seizing territory at all. And, in fact, even if the Church’s knight corps captured Devil’s Castle and everything leading up to it, it wouldn’t mean the subjugation of the former Isla Centurum of the cities that stood upon it.

But:

“No matter how it turns out, the Church gets to keep their glorious victory, doesn’t it?”

“That’s riiight. Because *your* people are kind enough to just sit there and do nothing.”

Emeralda grinned a bit as she complained.

“Is *that* what you have to say to me?” countered Rumack. “If you’re going to bring *that* up, none of this would’ve happened in the first place if the Devil King’s Army didn’t invade us. If *that’s* how you feel, take an army over to this ‘Japan’ and fetch Emilia for us.”

“Boooo...”

Rumack didn’t press her further. She had expected that reply.

“Your people,” in this case, referred to the Federated Order of the Five Continents, the military force stationed on the Central Continent since the Devil King’s defeat. Even before the Eight Great Scarves knights from the Eastern Island pulled out following the instability in their empire, the Federated Order had run on a complex set of intertwined international interests, resulting in an army without much in the way of cohesion. For its size, it had little function to speak of, a fact that made Rumack want to abandon her post as its supreme commander more than once.

The Federated Order *was* performing tasks like peacekeeping and infrastructure rebuilding for the cities and nations of the Central Continent. But its original mission was to dismantle Devil’s Castle—and that, of course, had seen no progress at all.

Out of the four surviving administrative cities, Wezu Quartus still had less than half of its peak population (and functionality), even though Noza Quartus

had already by and large recovered, leaving the Federated Order with little to do up there. Ea Quartus to the east, meanwhile, was keeping the Order at a deliberate arm's length—likely out of respect for the empire of Efzahan, a short journey away in the Eastern Island. Saza Quartus down south, however, was in semi-open conflict with the Southern Island religious state of Haruun, a member of the Federated Order—and thanks to that, it wasn't cooperating at all with the other three cities.

With a situation like this, what would happen if the Church, with its clear and morally sound mission, marched into the center of the Continent and planted its flag in the ground? No other city or nation had an independent military large enough to take on the Church knights' forces. The Continent's natives found the current disunity in their land—a far cry from the glory days of Isla Centurum—a gloomy, distressing sight. Should the Church succeed at their Crusade, it would mark their name for all time as the force that put a final end to the Devil King wars. They'd likely establish a new Isla Centurum on the spot. The old Isla Centurum prospered thanks to free economy and a nondespotic government, but now that it was a “holy land,” the site where God and sword defeated evil once and for all, it would become a Church city in name and deed.

“But listen to me. Yes, the Devil King's Army is there right now, but it's not like there's some inscrutable evil lurking about, like the Church imagines. How will they decide that this Crusade is a ‘success’ in the first place?”

“Oh, they don't need to defeat any exiisting enemy to succeed. Wouldn't taking down Devil's Castle be the simplest way, hmmm? Then they can say, ‘Ah, the final traces of evil have vaaanished,’ or ‘We have succeeded at long last where the Federated Order faaailed,’ or ‘Isla Centurum is back in human haaands again,’ right? Besides, isn't a good sixty percent or so of the Church forces noncombatants? Builders, farmers, those kinds of expeeerts at rebuilding? To them, as long as they start off on the right foot, that's ninety percent of the goal right theeere.”

There would be no “failure” in this Crusade. No matter how many had to be sacrificed, no matter how much money was wasted—if the ultimate goal was to demonstrate God's authority, it would be a “success” from the moment it began. But, of course, having real results to back up this lofty quest would be

nice. And this time, they had a concrete goal in mind—the now-empty Devil’s Castle, a site everyone in the world was aware of. In a post–Devil King’s Army world with no real public adversary for this Crusade to slay, the Church couldn’t possibly have an easier time with it.

“The one thing that does bother meee... Why would they give Bell the honor of leading this Crusade that’s all but guaranteed to be a rouuusing success?”

“You think they want to give her a role similar to Emilia’s?”

“Nooo. There’s no clear, easy-to-grasp enemy like Satan the Devil Kiiing this time. And yes, the three Archbishops besiides Cervantes are all in their twiiilight years, but it’s not like the supreme commanders would be fighting themseeelves. There just seems to be no reeeason to give the aisle over to this new giiirl.”

Rumack sighed as she watched Emeralda ponder over this. “Either way, if this marks the birth of a new Archbishop, Saint Aile can’t just idly sit and let it happen. I’m sure there will be a huge ordination ceremony at Sankt Ignoreido—a sort of festival before the Crusade—and I’m sure that Crusade will be scheduled to march through areas related to her. We’ll need to revise our plans a fair amount. You know, if you’re free, come on over to me once your cabinet meeting is over...”

Just as the general made the invitation, there was a heavy knock on the office door. Rumack, concerned, fell silent.

“You’re being quite louuud. What is it?”

“E-excuse me, madam. I have urgent news from the Northern Island for you —!”

It was a sorcerer, one Emeralda had personally selected as part of the force taking on heaven in two months. Seeing him made Emeralda and Rumack both feel a bad omen looming.

“The Northern Island? From Chief Wurs?”

The sorcerer took a look around him as Rumack asked, softly closing the door behind him before nodding.

“H-have you two heard the news about Bishop Crestia Bell...?”

“Yes, we were just discussing that.”

“Did something happen to herrr...?”

“Well, Bishop Bell seems to be in Phiyenci at the moment, and she has information for you. Information so vital that she imparted it to Chief Wurs, who imparted it to Lord Farfarello, who imparted it to Sir Arvaeim Willand in order to reach you as soon as possible.”

“I...do *not* like the souuund of that.”

Even Emeraldalda was looking a bit ill now. Judging by the channels Suzuno had gone through, this was something to be kept strictly confidential—and it was unlikely to be good news.

She took the letter presented to her and ran her eyes across it for a few moments. Then, out of nowhere, she shouted.

“You’re *kiiiiiiiiiiiidding* me!! Bell, you utter *fooooooooooooooooooool!!*”

“Wh-what?!”

The sound of Emeraldalda virtually shrieking made Rumack and the sorcerer shiver.

“No, no, no, can things this ridiculous even *happen*?! Is this even *possible*?!”

“Wh-what is it? What’s it say on there?!”

“It’s terrible! The absolute worst possible situation I could even think of! Bell’s made a glaring mistake! She barely even deserves to *live* after this! Why couldn’t she have shared this with us before now?! That udon-obsessed maniac!!”

“Udon...? What is that?”

“*Look* at this!!”

Taken aback by Emeraldalda’s unusually frank criticism, Rumack picked up the letter she’d tossed aside, reaching the section pointed out to her. It made her face tense up as she groaned.

“Th-this...”

“You see? Isn’t this terrible?!”

“Indeed, given the times... But I’m not sure she could have done much about it...or, at least, she doesn’t deserve to be raked over the coals for it...”

“I’m *telling* you, she should have let us know *before* this happened! I came to know her *months* ago by now! She should have told me from the beginning! Then we could have taken up some other plan from the very start! By *now*, there’s just nothing we can do, is there? All our efforts are up in smoke now!”

“Y-yes, but... I mean, neither we nor she could’ve imagined that she would be promoted from honorary bishop straight to Archbishop...”

“Then she should have resigned! That, or she should’ve given up on interfering with the Church, quit her job as cleric, and gone back to Japan! Maybe run a noodle shop while keeping Chiho and Sasazuka safe! *Then* none of this would have happened!!”

Emeralda was taking advantage of Suzuno’s absence to essentially let her mouth run unguarded. But Rumack couldn’t blame her for this outburst.

The letter came from the hand of Arvaeim Willand, with a message mixed in from Dhin Dhem Wurs. It stated that Suzuno had already entered into secret negotiations with the Northern Island to establish a Church knight garrison; that the new Archbishop Crestia Bell was native to Saint Aile; and that Bell Parish, the diocese from her homeland currently run by her father, just happened to be in the port town of Lamoise, in the republic of Kierence, a port town serving as the front door to the entire Western Island.

“We went through all of this trouble to funnel all of our logistics to the route between Saint Aile and Lamoise, and now it’s *all* going to be one massive boon to the Church! We didn’t delay them at all—we helped them speed things up! It’s going to be one giant welcoming parade for the new Archbishop! They’re going to march their armies from Saint Aile straight to Lamoise, come hell or high water! Right down the route we tried to overload with supplies!”

“Calm down! Calm down, all right?!”

“How can anyone stay *caaalm* at this...?!”

Like a balloon full of air that suddenly sputters it all out, zooming through the

air, Emerald's head settled down upon her desk.

"Do Emilia and...the others...know about this?"

"I—I cannot say."

"No, Emilia and the rest of the group in Japan don't matter here. The issue is Alciel. If *his* side doesn't know, there's nothing we can do. We only considered the route to Noza Quartus through the Northern Island up to now, but if there's a new Archbishop with close ties to Lamoise, or Kierence, the Church could stake its honor on restoring Wezu Quartus and decide to build a route to Devil's Castle straight from the west. Whether they can do that in two months is another matter, but if we're advanced upon from two directions, the Devil King's Army might engage in direct battle with the advance forces. This is terribly bad news! Rumack, we need to form a strategy at once!"

Judging by the suddenly fast-paced, staccato manner of speech she was now taking, it was eminently clear just how fazed Emerald was by this.

The Church knights' vanguard army making contact with the Devil King's forces didn't just mean that Maou's goals would never be realized. Emerald and Rumack had made secret contact with the Devil King's Army, to say nothing of Suzuno, and that—along with Wurs's control over the whole effort—was in grave danger of being exposed. If it were, a simple military conflict would become the least of their worries. It would throw all of Saint Aile and the Northern Island into chaos. The entire world could very well split apart.

"...I understand that now is a difficult time for them...but the future of the Western and Northern Islands lies in the balance. We have no choice."

"What do you mean? What's that?" Rumack asked.

Emerald took out a palm-sized yellow bar of some sort from a desk drawer. The general gave it a confused look.

"Oh, did I never show this to you, Rumack?"

Emerald grimly began tracing her finger on the surface of the bar.

"This is a secret trick of ours. In fact, it's the latest model, apparently. Emilia purchased it for me."

It was nine in the evening when Chiho, fresh from commiserating with Suzuno over some fresh udon at a just-opened noodle restaurant, finally got back home and sat at her desk, ready to enter exam-prep mode for the first time. But not half an hour after she began, her phone rang. She scowled at the screen.

“Oh, is this...?”

Looking at the number—or lack thereof—she realized this was an Idea Link, not a phone call.

“...Hello?”

“Helloooo! I hope I’m not bothering you at night! It’s niiight in Japan, isn’t it? Are you free at the moment?”

“Emeralda?! Y-yes!”

Chiho noticed the tinge of fatigue in Emeralda’s voice. Then it dawned on her.

“Is this about Suzu—I mean, Bell?”

“Ahh, yes, you’ve already heeeard?”

“Yeah, I guess she’s now at the top of the Church? And Lady Wurs is *super* angry at her...”

“I’d like to give her a piece of my miiind, too...”

“Um, would you mind going easy on her for me? Because she never saw this coming at all, either.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter nooow. What’s past is paaast. But enough about thaaat. Chiho, I have a really big favor I need to ask you foor...”

“Yes?”

“Can you find a waaay to contact Alciel for meee?”

“Ashiya?”

“Yes, I know it’s straaange to ask this of you from Japan, but Bell becoming an Archbishop has some rather far-reeeaching effects...”

Emeralda gave Chiho a digested rundown of just how much of an impact this news brought to her world.

“So if Alciel doesn’t have accurate informaaaation to work with, I think that could lead to trouuuuble should push come to shove...”

“That *does* sound awful. And come to think of it, Urushihara and Laila set off for the Central Continent a while ago, but I haven’t heard anything in particular from them since...although I haven’t had a chance to talk with Maou and everyone in a little while anyway...”

“Lucifer...? Exactly how long ago was this?”

“Exactly? Umm, it was just after Ms. Kisaki left, so it’d be around three weeks ago. Twenty days or so, at least.”

“Twenty days or so?!”

“Emeralda?!”

“And Al hasn’t contacted me, eiiiither... Boy... It just feels like we’ve all wasted sooo much time here...”

“Is—is it that bad?”

“Well, it’s partly my fault for not staying in contaact with Bell, but there’s a lot of fishy bizzzness surrounding Bell’s promotion. Our backs may be against the wall more than we thiiink right now. I hate to interruiiupt you while you’re busy, but if you can reach out to the Devil Kiiing, or Emiiilia, or Nooord, or anyone, and tell them to relay the daaangers I told you about to Alciel for meeee...”

Chiho resisted the urge to sigh and physically nodded at Emeralda. “All right. Actually, do you want me to send an Idea Link to Ashiya right now? That would probably be best...”

“Ah, ahh, that’s a little daaangerous, so if you could avoid thaaat for now... As I said, with Bell’s ordinaaation, the whole schedule of the Crusade’s being turned on its heaaad, so I think the eyes on the Central Continent will be gazing down harder than ever befooore. If some advance fooorce there picks up on an Idea Link from Japaaan, it could put your own home in daaanger...”

“...Okay, I understand. I’ll talk about it with Maou and the others.”

She understood, but Chiho couldn’t come up with any other ideas. She knew

full well that Urushihara and Laila had set off themselves because direct communication with Devil's Castle on the Central Continent was too risky. The only option left was to have someone follow their trail and travel through the Northern Island to relay the message. The likely candidate for this was Farfarello, currently with Wurs—tossing an Idea Link to the Northern Island posed less of a problem, and that was why he was stationed there in the first place.

“Ahh, but I’d like to keep the Malebraaanche attending to Lady Wurs where he is, if I couuuld—”

But Emeraldalda cut herself off before she could even propose the idea.

“Lady Wurs is in a rather delicate situaaation at the moment. Unless she has protection from our side she can trust at all tiiimes, we may not be able to guarantee her saaafety, if it comes to that. And we still don’t know the motives of the other Archbiiishops here...”

“...Ah...”

“I will try to find a way to contact Alciel from myyy end as well, so see if you can figure out an approach from Japaaan for me.”

“All right...”

“Sorry to botherrr you!”

After the call, Chiho held on to the phone for a few moments, her eyes blank. But the world, and fate itself, was still not ready to leave an aspiring college student in peace.

“Hyah?!”

The phone was still pressed against her ear when it began vibrating again, receiving a signal from somewhere. It made her yelp a bit as she let it fall out of her hand. Picking it up in a rush, she looked at the screen...and the name on it made her wince all over again.

“...Hello?”

“Huhh? Why’re you soundin’ like such a sourpuss, huh? If I caught you sleeping, that’s my bad.”

The completely carefree voice on the other end required no introduction. It belonged to Gabriel, who should have been in Devil's Castle on the Central Continent right now.

"Y'know, there's something I need to tell ya, so... To tell you the truth, I'm actually way underground right now."

"Underground?"

"Mm-hmm! And it took a looot of work, mm-kay? You keep on telling me about how you don't want the Church knights peeping on your Idea Links...sooo, I dove deep into an underground lake on the east side of the Continent, opened up a small Gate, and that's where I'm callin' you from. It's not an Idea Link! It's part of my phone plan! Pretty neat, huh?"

"Uh..."

Chiho wasn't sure what was so neat about this.

"You won't be detected this way?"

"Well, it beats doin' nothing, yeah? It's harder to spot anything this deep compared to the surface, and they can't use sonar to interfere with me...but how 'bout you let me brag about this later? We kinda have a pretty big problem over here, and I figured, y'know, maybe you'd want to know and stuff?"

"...Yes...?"

"So anyway, I got good news and bad news, buuuuut..."

"I'm seriously going to lose my temper soon. Start with the good news."

"Aw, you're so nice! All angry, but still playing along with me. So the good news is that Kinanna, you know, he's totally better now! Just wanna start with that."

"Oh, is he? That's good."

It was good news. The fate of Kinanna, with the central role he played in launching Devil's Castle and kicking off the war in heaven, made him the literal core of the entire conflict. Maou seemed to be hoping for a lot from whatever memories he had left, but the Astral Gem in his throat took top priority. He was old, he was senile, and he had a propensity for absorbing magic with abandon

and turning into a movie monster, but being in Japan had almost killed him, so Urushihara and Laila had reluctantly decided to take him back to Ente Isla. If he was healthier as a result, that was a rare bright spot among the minefield of concerns they had.

But Gabriel's voice proceeded along, as dryly as ever.

"So then the bad news is...uh, well, he's gotten too better. Kinanna, I mean."

"...Oh?"

"And he's still senile."

".....Oh?"

It took a few moments for Chiho to realize what Gabriel's words meant. Imagining the fallout from it made her eyes turn into saucers.

"W-wait, so, um, are you all right?! How's everyone in Devil's Castle...?"

"Oh, a few of them were hurt, but nobody's in critical condition, mm-kay?"

"People got hurt?!"

That struck Chiho as enough of a serious matter. But judging by the tone of Gabriel's voice, that wasn't the end of it.

"I tell you, it scared the crap out of all of us! Like, I knew he got big, but not that big!"

"...That big?"

"Definitely Godzilla size."

"No! You're kidding!"

"I'm not gonna take all this risk just so I can clown you over the phone, y'know."

"Wha-wha—how can you be so relaxed about this?! Aren't you supposed to be protecting Devil's Castle, Gabriel?! What are you even doing?!"

"Hey, Alciel and Lucifer and a lot of other folks are workin' hard to deal with him right now, mm-kay? So that's why I'm all the way down here, lettin' Japan know. But I've also kinda run into some guff on the way here..."

Gabriel's dry voice was starting to give Chiho dizzy spells.

"So it looks like our kaiju friend got spotted by the Federated Order knights stationed down in Saza Quartus."

"Wha...?!"

If Emeralda had been around to hear this, she'd be on the ground, foaming at the mouth. Even Chiho found her mind a blank, unable to comprehend these events. This was a disaster, one that made Suzuno's promotion look like a drop in the bucket. Depending on what the Federated Order chose to do, everything they'd built up to now might need to be shelved as soon as tomorrow.

"Yeah, so why d'you think I'm taking this roundabout approach to contactin' ya? Sorry to bother you and all, but you mind telling the Devil King and Emilia about this ASAP? Because I have no idea how this'll turn out, feel me?"

"A-all right! I will! B-but..."

"Mmm?"

"Why didn't you just call Maou directly, then...?"

"Well, I thought about it, but then I realized I never got his number..."

"...Why do you know mine?"

"I asked Alciel for it earlier. A little bird told me that in an emergency, I'd be better off contacting Chiho Sasaki ahead of the Devil King, soooo..."

"...Who said that?"

"Gee, who was it? Either Lucifer or Laila, I think—but anyway, the Devil King can't access his phone during work, right? But you quit your job, so even if you're at school, I figured you'd check your phone no sooner than, like, three hours from now, mm-kay? And you know how much Emilia hates my guts. If she saw a call from me, she's, like, guaranteed to let it go to voice mail, and who knows when she'd get to it? But whether you hate me or not, you're still willing to deal with me, right? You're, I'd say, the glue that holds everyone together. Their manager, sort of thing."

"..."

The fact that Chiho couldn't deny this out of hand upset her stomach a little.

"So anyway, that's the breaking news from Ente Isla, so can you spread it around? Alciel's the one making the final calls over here, but I don't want Emilia and the Devil King whinin' at me afterward. Oh, and I don't think we're gonna have much way to contact the North and West right now, so if you could figure out a way to reach 'em, then super. You can toss them an Idea Link no problem, right?"

Depending on how things turned out, Chiho thought she might have to contact Emeralda immediately. She somehow found it in her mind to recall the errand Emeralda had just asked of her.

"Okay. Now, um, Gabriel?"

"Hmm?"

"I need you to give Ashiya a message for me, too, actually. Suzuno's going to become one of the six Archbishops, and the whole North and West are in a tizzy about it. Emeralda gave me a frantic call to tell me."

Chiho went on to explain how the news energized the entire West, to the point that the Church may decide to rebuild Wezu Quartus, the main city on the Central Continent's west side.

"...Ooooh. Sounds like Alciel's gonna have another ulcer soon, huh?"

Even Gabriel instantly understood the portent of Suzuno's promotion.

"But boy, you are one reliable young woman, aren'tcha?"

...But he still reacted in his usual manner, which almost gave Chiho an ulcer of her own.

"Anyway, I'll tell him, but I'm not sure he can do much of anything about that. Just make it clear to the Devil King and the West and the North that we're kind of in panic mode over here too, 'kay? Okay, laterrr!"

Chiho stared at her phone for a moment after Gabriel had hung up. Then, as if he had waited for that exact moment on purpose, Maou called her. She reflexively pushed the "Talk" button.

"Hey, uh, Chi? Sorry to call out of nowhere. I think you paid too much money

for your part of the bill at the udon place, so I was wondering how you wanted me to pay you back—”

“Maou!!”

“Uhh, yeah?”

The tone and emotion behind Chiho’s voice made Maou stand up straight on his end of the line.

“Maou...”

“Y-yes?”

“...If I don’t pass any of my entrance exams this year...it’ll be *your* fault, all right?”

“Huh? Huh?! Wh-what happened?!”

“...I need everyone to assemble in Room 201 right now.”

“Huh?”

“I need Yusa, and Nord, and Maou and Libicocco, and Acieth, too, in Room 201 right now! I’ll be out in front of my house! That’s all!!”

“Ah, wait...”

Leaving the flustered young man behind, Chiho took up her phone, a blank expression on her face, and sent a message off to Emi, bashing the keys to the point that she could have broken them right off.

Then:

“I’ve been involved for this long, so of course I’ll help you as much as I can. But I can’t accept the fact that people see me as some kind of secretary or manager for Maou and everyone. I’d like to have some better treatment, please.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Sorry about that.”

Atop the brand-new tatami floor in Room 201—surprisingly occupied for this late at night—Maou and Emi were currently on all fours, bowing to Chiho with

mixed emotions on their faces.

“Everybody’s just counted on you for how tolerant you were. Try not to be too mean to them.”

Libicocco’s attempt to assuage Chiho fell on deaf ears. She was at the end of her rope.

“I had to muster up a lot of resolve to quit my job at MgRonald. I even started going to test prep before I quit, so I wouldn’t be wavering about it! I didn’t think I could aid you guys in your war coming up, and I can’t fight anyway, so I figured I’d just be meddling if I volunteered to help. So I didn’t think that the moment any of you got in trouble, they’d call *me* instead of you two!”

After the *zirga*, where she played a major role in taking back the Spear of Adramelechinus, Chiho quit her job at MgRonald, a special place where she’d first met a special man in her life. She was taking herself away from the front lines of battle—and then this happened. Even worse, every problem presented to her was far beyond anything she could solve. So why were they all calling her first?

“Well, it is because Chiho, she has the respect of everyone, no?”

It sounded like something Gabriel might say, but it came from Acieth, who had joined Nord here.

“I know,” a stern-faced Erone replied. “Chiho’s the kind of person who can accept whatever comes her way.”

“I’m not, and I can’t.”

“Everybody, they do not want you to be solving the problems for them, Chiho. But sometimes people, they talk to someone, they get calm, yes? Your voice, it calms. In a way, you are like the mother to everyone in *mmmph*—”

“Acieth! And you stop, too, Erone.”

Acieth and Erone meant to compliment Chiho, no doubt. But Nord put his hands over their mouths anyway. He knew that wasn’t the reaction Chiho was trying to get.

“Regardless, this is a serious situation. There’s a chance that the Federated

Order of the Five Continents stationed in the south may be on their way to Devil's Castle right now. If the port town of Lamoise starts to send boatloads of supplies to Wezu Quartus, we could see forces come in from the west, and then Lidem's interference from the force will be only half as effective. To be honest, we're no longer in a situation where we can wait until July."

"...Oh..."

"If the Federated Order in Saza Quartus moves now, when Suzuno has become an Archbishop and Emeralda and Rumack's interference has backfired on them, Lidem's not in any position to stop the Church forces more than necessary. In fact, both the Federated Order in Noza Quartus and the Mountain Corps in the Northern Island may have to roll out."

"R-right..."

"But right now, Kinanna's spreading havoc around Devil's Castle, and we can't really count on Ashiya, Urushihara, or Gabriel being able to help with anything else."

Chiho set her eyes upon the faces around her.

"We can't do anything about Kinanna being in Ente Isla, or Suzuno getting promoted after all her interference. None of this is anyone's fault in particular. But right now, we're the only ones with a complete picture of the situation. I think now's the time to make a formal decision of some sort. Maou?"

"...Yes. Um, right. Yes."

For some reason, all the news behind the trends occurring in Ente Isla, the demon realms, and the heavens kept being channeled to a Japanese teen—and even more, this teen's analysis of it all was so astute, nobody else knew how to address it.

"We need to launch Devil's Castle as quickly as we possibly can. I think that's the only option."

Her conclusion, as well, was nothing anyone could complain about.

"Like Emeralda said, the timing of Suzuno's promotion indicates that the main Crusade force will begin their march no later than one month from now. A

normal Archbishop ordination normally takes half a year and is marked by all kinds of fancy ceremonies, but this is an emergency situation, and it's coming right before a Crusade, so chances are they'll use the military march from Saint Aile to Lamoise as a sort of celebratory parade for Suzuno as well."

"I—I see..."

Maou was overwhelmed by Chiho's assessment, particularly a girl who shouldn't have known anything about Ente Isla's geography.

"But that theory doesn't bring Kinanna, and his discovery by the Federated Order, into account, so they *could* go into action even faster than that, apparently. They could deploy a large advance force ahead of the main knight battalions, just to be sure they don't lag behind the Federated Order troops. In *that* case, we could be looking at a week or less, even."

"But they could both be delayed, depending on what happens first...or I guess we can't rely on that, huh?"

"Wishful thinking could lead to bad things later," Chiho said, cutting down Emi's less-than-confident observation.

"The plan was to evacuate General Rumack and Bell's troops out of the area when we're ready to launch Devil's Castle, right? Does everyone on the ground know about this plan?" Nord asked.

Maou bitterly shook his head. "We didn't anticipate a retreat against forces attacking us from multiple fronts. If it wasn't for this Crusade, we expected to have either Rumack, Emeraldal, or Suzuno at Devil's Castle at all times."

"What about the commanders General Rumack and the others left behind?"

"It's an open question how much we can trust them. They're just as starved for information as anyone else...and no matter how much Dhin Dhem Wurs guaranteed their safety later on, that was still nothing but an oral promise. Once they hear one knight corps or another is about to attack them, they might decide to ditch the scene sooner than later. The people working directly under Rumack ought to be safe enough, but below them...? Crap. Emeraldal's right, isn't she? We really *did* waste a ton of time. I really shoulda told Urushihara and Laila to come back immediately once they got there."

“Gabriel went through an incredible amount of trouble to call me, and Emeraldalda warned me about it herself, so I really *do* think we shouldn’t send any Idea Links from here in Japan. Which leaves us...”

“The only option’s to send someone after Lucifer, isn’t it?”

Chiho nodded at Emi.

“And that’s got to be me, right?” Emi asked, resigned to her fate. “In this case.”

“Whoa, Emi, that’s...”

Maou, surprised, tried to stop her. But Emi put her hand up.

“I know what you want to say. But who else do we have? If we send you or Libicocco, they’ll immediately spot your demonic force and it’s all over. Father and Chiho can’t defend themselves, and Acieth and Erone are even worse ideas. So that just leaves me, doesn’t it?”

“But what if that space suit shows up...?”

“If she does, she does. Thinking about it here won’t tell us who she really is. Lucifer and Laila were *supposed* to be comparing their memories with Gabriel, but we haven’t heard anything from them, so I’m assuming the three of them didn’t come up with any big breakthroughs. So no matter *when* I run into her, it’s gonna be the same thing. I’ll just have to probe her out and keep from making any funny moves.”

The resolve present in and around her words prevented Maou from making any further arguments. He had other things to say, but saying them wouldn’t help any.

He did want to keep Emi and Alas Ramus away from the threat of that astronaut, but more than that, they had refrained from getting Emi involved in the prep for this battle (she was totally hands off, in fact) because Emeraldalda and the others just wanted her to have a quiet life once it was all over. They wanted to wipe the tactical weapon known as “Emilia the Hero” out of people’s minds so Emi could focus on rebuilding her home village. That, alongside preserving the future of Saint Aile, was one reason Emeraldalda and Rumack had signed on to the war against heaven.

If Emi descended into the Central Continent right now—at the height of its chaos, right when all the world’s forces were bearing down upon it—that hope would instantly vanish. After everything in Efzahan, there were already enough rumors that Emilia the Hero was still alive. If she showed up in front of the Church knight corps and Federated Order and her survival spread around as the official word, then Emi, Nord, and the land they called home would never be at peace.

“What else can we do? I’m sorry for everyone who’s covered for me until now, but at this point, I’ve got to give up and face facts. And you *know* how much crap Bell has gone through to protect my future life. I can’t just sit here and let all of *you* protect me forever. This was *supposed* to be for Alas Ramus, and if it is, then there’s no way I can just sit here.”

Emi smiled a bit, recalling the “daughter” currently sleeping inside her.

“...Emilia...”

“I’m sorry, Father. I know it may put you through some hardship again as well...”

“It doesn’t matter to me, Emilia. But may I ask you one thing?”

“What’s that?”

Nord faced up to his daughter, a woman who had already borne the brunt of the world on her shoulders once.

“If you’re going to do this, take it all the way. No matter what happens, I’ll always be on your side. So follow the path you think is right, and follow through with the choice you make.”

“...Yes. Of course.”

Emi nodded then stood up, shaking all the questions and obligations out of her mind.

“Thanks for persevering through all this, Chiho.”

“Oh, not at all...but Yusa, you aren’t going right now, are you...?”

“Not right this minute, but as soon as I can. Tomorrow morning, if I can manage that. Devil King, Libicocco...”

“Yeah?”

“...Yes?”

“Can you take my shifts for me? I’ll contact the manager about it.”

“...You got it.”

“...Very well.”

Because neither Maou nor Emi expected things to develop *this* quickly, they had both taken a decent number of part-time shifts, albeit not as many as usual.

“You know, I think about it, and Maou, he doesn’t do much—*mffh*—”

“Acieth!”

Acieth, faced with the sight of a Devil King and archdemon picking up shifts for the Hero, saw no reason to hold back. Nord did, again.

Then, unexpectedly, Emi shook her head once more.

“Acieth, I know he doesn’t look like much, but the Devil King’s very helpful.”

“Hohh?” Acieth said.

“Don’t talk about me like I’m something you got at the hundred-yen shop.”

“And *you* stop pouting after I compliment you for a change.” Emi smiled at him. “It’s kind of embarrassing to admit,” she began, “but do you remember, Devil King, the evening of the day after I first saw you in Sasazuka?”

“The evening of the.....yeah, I... Yeah.”

His odd turn of phrase made Chiho blush a little. But as she thought about it, nothing good could’ve come from Maou and Emi’s first meeting in Japan. It helped her calm down quickly.

“How could I ever forget?”

“What did I say to you then?”

“You wanna bring that up *now*?”

Maou gave Chiho an awkward look.

"I forget the exact wording, but, like, if I gave up on conquering the world and stayed here in Japan forever, you wouldn't rip my head off, and stuff."

"...Huh?"

Chiho looked at Emi, not expecting this. Emi could feel her eyes upon her but nodded at Maou instead.

"You phrased it a little more evilly than I did, but yeah, pretty much. Acieth?"

"Mmm?"

"I'm so glad that everyone's been working to help me and Father live quietly in Sloane someday...but you know, if it comes to it, there's another way for us."

"Yusa, do you mean...?"

Chiho's eyes opened wide as Emi finally turned to her and nodded.

"Once this is all over...becoming a full resident of Japan might not be bad, either."

"...Yusa!"

Chiho's concern for Emi, knowing her past and current position, intermingled with her joy for her as a friend. It lent a complex mix of emotions to her voice.

"It's common for people to leave the house when they're done with school and never live there again, right? If I want to, I can start a farm in Japan, too. And, you know, having people like Maki look into colleges for me... I think there's a part of me that always knew I could never have a quiet life in Ente Isla any longer. Besides, with the Devil King...or *thanks* to the Devil King, I guess... I've trained myself to the point that life in Japan wouldn't be a handicap to me at all."

"So he is...helping you?"

Emi nodded at Acieth's question. "Yes, for better or for worse. But as you can see, I trust him enough to let him handle work shifts for me, so he *is* helping, you know?"

She lowered her head a little after she'd finished speaking.

"...You sure about that?" Maou said. "Work is one thing, but if you disappear

from Ente Isla, that'll probably open the door for us to do whatever we want."

It sounded like a not-so-veiled threat but Emi seemed not to care in the slightest.

"Well, that's fine, really. Seeing Libicocco get used to the job has made me realize that you and Alciel and Lucifer weren't some exception when it came to demons mastering human life. So why not let your demons do what they like? Once we defeat heaven and help Alas Ramus's friends, I'm officially retiring as Hero, and I don't care what people say. Let everybody else in the world figure it out. At the very least, I'm sure leaders like the Azure Emperor would prefer things that way."

"...Wow. Not exactly a thrilling end to it all."

"But let me emphasize one point."

"Huh?"

"Despite all that, I haven't forgotten that you're the root cause of all this. I'm still looking to make you repay that debt sometime."

"...What's the deal with *that*?"

Maou thought Emi was way too late in drudging that up again. But unlike before, at least she didn't seem intent on lunging at him with a sword. In fact, she was even turning a bit toward Chiho as she said it.

"Yusa...?"

"...Never mind. But if we've decided on a direction to take, I'm heading home for now. First thing tomorrow, I'll call Ms. Iwaki, have her switch my shifts around, and then I gotta prepare for the trip."

Refusing to answer Chiho's question, Emi half talked to herself as she headed for the Room 201 door.

"If I think it'll take a while, I'll figure out a way to stay in regular contact. Until then..."

She opened the door, sounding for all the world like she was taking a quick vacation to a neighboring prefecture.

“...Oh?”

Then she noticed a faint aroma in the air. It made her nose wrinkle.

“Oh, great, it’s raining.”

“Huh?”

Chiho looked up as Maou opened a window. A light drizzle had started to fall.

“You’re right. Did they predict any rain?”

Maou turned on his TV with the remote. He was just in time for the weather forecast on the late-night news, the meteorologist telling viewers to expect light rain from mid-evening until tomorrow afternoon.

“You wanna spend the night downstairs, Emilia?” Nord suggested.

Emi shook her head. “Alas Ramus fell asleep before I could give her a bath, so I want her to take a shower tomorrow morning. So...Devil King?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m gonna borrow your umbrella.”

Not waiting for a response, she grabbed the large black umbrella hanging on the wall by the door.

“You don’t use this much, do you?”

Unclasping the fastener revealed a pattern of dust. It had clearly not seen much time outside.

“Well...no, not really.”

“Let me take you home on the way, Chiho. This is big enough for the two of us.”

“Oh, all right. See you guys later.”

Chiho hurriedly stood up, quickly bowed, and followed Emi out the door. After seeing them leave, Maou gave Nord an uneasy look.

“...You’re okay with this?”

“It was Emilia’s choice to make. I’ll accept it.”

“No, I didn’t mean that...”

“What I think about it doesn’t matter. It’s not that I’ve forgiven Lucifer’s army for torching my village, but by this point, it’s a trivial issue.”

“Not that I’m one to talk, but...*trivial*?”

Nord turned to Maou, his face surprisingly serene. “My home in Sloane, my fields... They *were* precious to me. Irreplaceable. I put everything I had into keeping those fields healthy. I inherited a home packed with the memories of my own parents. I lived with my wife there... They’re valuable to me. But...”

Nord turned toward the empty space near Maou, where Emi had sat a moment ago.

“You’ll never find a father out there who doesn’t value his child’s happy future more than anything else. I think you understand that now, don’t you?”

“...Ohh.” Maou felt like he was being exposed to Nord’s full, fatherly majesty.

“As a king, perhaps you’ve faced bitter decisions between someone you cherish and your duty as a leader. But me, I’m just a farming man like any other. I’d gladly tell anyone that my daughter’s happiness is my own. If Emilia says she wants to live in Japan, I have no reason to stop her. I don’t want to get in the way of my own child, so I suppose I’d give up on returning to Sloane and find some work to do here, in Japan. If Laila’s with us, I’d be happy being our househusband, and Japan’s agricultural industry is practically dying for people. Maybe I could try starting a new farm, in some new place. With Laila by my side, anything’s possible.”

“Wow, Dad, whatever you do, you are always *stuh-born*, huh?”

The casual side comment from Acieth, along with the incredibly warm declaration of love from Nord, made Maou look a little sullen.

“I guess I asked a stupid question, didn’t I?”

“I guess so,” Nord said with a smile. “But what about you, Acieth? Do you want to stay with the Devil King, or downstairs?”

“Mmm, maybe I stay with you, Dad? Ever since Ashiya leave, food at Maou’s, it is the too much flavor, yes? Fewer the choices, too.”

“Eesh.”

“How *dare* you...”

It was the unvarnished truth, but having Acieth give it to them rankled Libicocco as much as it did Maou.

“Well, I suppose we’ll be on standby for a while again, but war is war. Let’s all make the most of it.”

Coming from Nord—a man who, after being chased out of his home, had been spending much of the past few years waiting, and enduring—the words had real weight. Maou gave him no special reply, even as this waiting game, coming as it did at the very climax of matters, slightly irritated him.

After Nord and Acieth had left, Maou and Libicocco found themselves joined by an uncomfortable silence instead.

“...So, wanna go to sleep?”

“I suppose so.”

There was not much else left to the day, no TV program they were dying to watch, so while it was still a tad early, all they could do was brush their teeth and turn out the lights.

“Maou owned an umbrella like this, huh?”

Chiho, shoulder to shoulder with Emi, looked up at the charcoal gray umbrella above her. It was wide enough in diameter to keep both her and Emi completely dry, the framework durable enough to withstand most sudden gales. Between that and the famous menswear brand engraved on the handle, it was clearly a cut above almost anything else Maou owned.

“Maybe he bought it for his managerial training or something, huh? ...Yusa?”

“...Hmm, eh?”

“Yusa?”

It may have been her imagination, but Emi’s profile looked tense.

“Oh, what did you say, Chiho?”

“Huh? Oh, um, just that Maou sure didn’t skimp on his choice of umbrella...”

“Ah. Y-yes, you’re right. But it’s not that uncommon, is it?”

“Well, if it’s just light rain, he’ll usually just bike over as is...and if it’s not, he usually has this cheap clear-plastic umbrella instead, I think.”

“It was six thousand yen, too...”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing. I’m sure it’s just Alciel telling him that buying it is fine and all, but it’s too fancy for regular use or something. Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha...”

“Ohh, right. Not to dump on Maou, but that sounds about right with him. So good thing you spotted it, Yusa! It wasn’t visible at all... Did you know where it was, or...?”

“No, no, absolutely not, I just figured that there’s three of them living there, but in terms of who’s actually likely to leave the apartment, it’s just going to be the Devil King and Alciel and they probably swap it, so I did a little looking around and it just happened to be there so I borrowed it! That’s it!”

Emi paused to take a breath.

“Oh, really?” Chiho asked, overwhelmed by her momentum. That was the last she spoke of the umbrella.

As for Emi:

“...”

After dropping Chiho off at her house, she headed back toward Sasazuka Station, hefting up that high-society black umbrella and sighing.

“I could never tell Chiho in a million years that I gave it to him...”

To be frank, she had so little interest in what happened after that evening that she completely forgot about the umbrella all this time. It was sheer coincidence that she came to notice it, and it was Chiho’s fawning over how out of character it was for Maou that jogged her memory. Yes, it was her gift all along.

“...It wasn’t a gift. I just returned it.”

The rain was much heavier that day. When she was caught in the drizzle and

drenched, Emi was presented with a pathetic little plastic affair, reportedly grabbed off a nearby mailbox it was hanging from. Being granted this bit of charity—once she knew who'd granted it—was so frustrating, so humiliating, that she broke it into tiny bits and threw them all in the garbage. She felt so guilty about it later—and it felt so pathetic that her mortal enemy was using something like *that*—that she bought this one as payback for him.

This one had been bought at Takashimada-ya, a department store in the central district of Shinjuku that was on the way between her job at Dokodemo and home. The wider it was, she figured, the more useful it'd be if he was carrying a bunch of shopping bags around. *Too* expensive, and he'd give her an earful and maybe not accept it at all, so she deliberately took the cheapest model in the brand. She was fussy about its being brand-name because, recalling the date Maou had with Chiho in Shinjuku and the clothes he'd picked for it, she thought it'd be useful when dressing up or as formal fashion.

"I must have lost my mind..."

What could she have been thinking? Especially when she had been so much keener on taking Maou's life back then? She had been ready to kill him the moment he showed any opening to her. So why had she considered his feelings so much when choosing that umbrella?

"I better make sure he doesn't tell anyone about this later."

Maou was notoriously loose-lipped about odd things like these. There was no way she could let him tell Chiho that she had bought this. But then, once she'd reached Sasazuka Station and closed the umbrella, she realized:

"Actually, I'm not gonna see him for a while, am I?"

Given the situation, once she contacted Iwaki tomorrow, she may very well have to set off for Ente Isla right then. She wouldn't have a chance to return this. Stopping by Villa Rosa Sasazuka in the morning was an option, but considering that she'd be in Ente Isla for at least a week, she already had a ton of Alas Ramus's stuff to pack. It was in the midst of Golden Week, the string of holidays that dominated the first week of May in Japan, but tomorrow was a regular weekday. She didn't want to carry all this on a packed commuter train tomorrow morning, and it wasn't like Maou needed it back immediately. It

could probably wait until after she returned.

“I’ll just text him a note, then,” she said to herself as she shook the water off the umbrella and folded it up inside the station.

“...”

Holding it underneath her arm, Emi waited for the next train home to arrive. On the elevated platform, she had a view of the general neighborhood around Villa Rosa Sasazuka. It made her smile a bit.

“‘I want you to give it up and find a new life for yourself,’ huh...?”

The next rain-soaked Keio train rolled into the station just then, drowning out the words. It was still wet, but Emi held the umbrella to her side, making sure it didn’t hit anyone on the crowded car.

“It’s so embarrassing... Jeez.”

The next morning, Emi called Iwaki the moment the store opened, and she apologized for the sudden shift change. Iwaki, following in Kisasi’s style, didn’t demand that she find someone to fill in for her, but considering the circumstances, Emi strongly suggested that Maou and Libicocco would likely step up. The new manager seemed relieved about that, which relieved Emi in turn as she hung up.

After breakfast, she brought Alas Ramus into her body—fending off her earnest requests for playtime—put on a winter fleece jacket, and strapped on a large backpack.

“Well. Can’t wait to see what kind of disaster *this* turns out to be.”

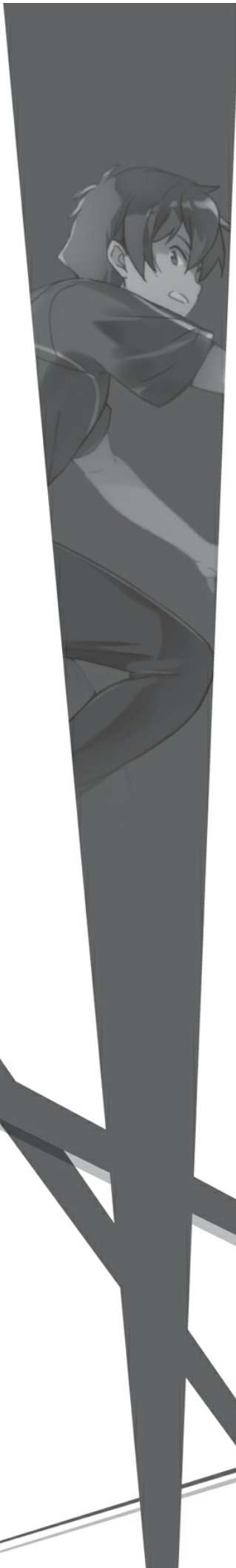
Whining to herself, she took a single feather out of her pocket and dropped it on the carpet beneath her.

The entire floor of Room 501 in Urban Heights Eifukucho turned into a Gate to Ente Isla. It may have been her imagination, but Emi thought she heard the thundering roar of some mythical lizard on the other side.

“Heroes aren’t supposed to fight kaiju. It’s totally the wrong genre.”

With a wry grin, she jumped in.

**THE DEVIL
CHOOSES
THIS
MOMENT
TO PLAY IT
NORMAL**



THE DEVIL CHOOSES THIS MOMENT TO PLAY IT NORMAL

“Well, we made it through another day, eh?”

“We sure did. That was the most challenging rush we’ve had since I joined this location.”

Libicocco and Iwaki were both sweating a little as they chatted.

“I’m so hungry... What a slog that was.”

“There wasn’t a single moment to take a break...”

Akiko and Kawata closed their registers, chuckling a bit about the uncommonly huge figures entered into the day’s sales journal.

“The café space has been closed down!” Maou said as he jogged down, carrying the journal from the upstairs registers.

“But certainly, having the trainees working hard sure helped us make it through the day, didn’t it?”

Two people had joined the crew a couple weeks after Libicocco, each playing unsung-hero roles in the responsibilities they were assigned, so the veterans were able to work without excess concerns.

“It’s the first time we beat figures from the Kisaki era!”

Maou heard Iwaki softly boast to herself as her team closed the downstairs. The Hatagaya Station McGonald, after a long era of seemingly magical sales increases every year, had put up much more normal statistics since Kisaki’s departure—some good periods, some not-so-good ones. The fact they’d made it through a busy day like this without major issues indicated that Iwaki got along with the Kisaki-trained crew—and that the Iwaki gang, led by Libicocco, meshed well with them, too.

“My liege, do you want to visit the bathhouse?”

“Sure. *Man*, I sweated like a pig all day.”

With the restaurant behind them, Maou and Libicocco headed straight for the Sasanoyu public bathhouse to shake off the stress. After toasting the day’s successes with the lady at the counter with some milk, they took in the cool evening breeze as they headed home.

“I believe you begin later tomorrow, my liege?”

“Yeah. You get off by evening, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“I’ll run the washer in the morning, so give me anything you need washed.”

“Very well. Oh, and do you mind if I use the leftover eggs from breakfast?”

“Sure. Please.”

“All right. Have a good night, then.”

“Yeah, I’m *exhausted*. I think I’ll just sleep, too.”

The two of them, king and subject, lay down on opposite sides of the living room table.

“One second,” Maou said, sitting up.

“What’s wrong?”

“...Isn’t this kind of weird?”

“What is?”

“What *isn’t*?” he groaned from underneath the orange-tinted light. “It’s everything.”

“...”

Libicocco sat up as well, slouching forward as he crossed his arms in a threatening fashion.

“Do you mean how your life hasn’t changed at all, Your Demonic Highness, even though we may have to launch Devil’s Castle very soon?”

But when he spoke, Libicocco’s words were delicate.



“You can read me like a book, huh? Well, you’re right. I’m not doing a damn thing in all of this!”

“You’re keeping a decent job.”

“I—I *am* doing that, yes,” Maou grunted, scratching his head.

With Suzuno taking an Archbishop’s seat, the battle against heaven had recently made a very sharp turn for all of them. Emi had just departed early this morning for Ente Isla to check up on how her promotion and the Crusade were impacting matters. Chiho, despite quitting work and stepping away from Ente Isla, was now functioning as a sort of data clearinghouse. Ashiya was running around the world, negotiating between Ente Isla’s Devil’s Castle and the human race—he had to, or else the whole heaven-war thing was doomed. Even Urushihara was serving as Ashiya’s assistant/Kinanna’s transporter, although he was busy attempting to wrangle Kinanna alongside Ashiya and Gabriel right now.

“Didn’t Emilia say it herself?” the demon went on. “She told you she felt confident taking this journey because you’re still going along like always.”

Libicocco meant to reassure Maou—

“You know, Ashiya *still* doesn’t like dealing with Emi very much. Why are you so eager to take her side?”

—but instead, the King of All Demons was now questioning his loyalty.

“N-no, I mean, she *is* our coworker, and Chiho Sasaki keeps bugging us to get along with her. Besides, with my powers, I have no chance to ever compare to her, so I thought it best to avoid thinking or acting too confrontationally. You know, if I resist what Emilia and Chiho Sasaki tell me too much, that’ll cause trouble for Ms. Iwaki, won’t it?”

“Yeah...” Despite being a walking, talking ball of intimidation, Libicocco was almost being *too* concerned about what others thought of him. It made Maou wince. “And you’re okay with that? Like, your pride?”

“I’ve been an underling for a very long time. If I need to be involved with something for an extended period, I’m good at that.”

“Are you serious?”

Come to think of it, back before Maou united the demon realms under the name Satan, Libicocco, while a chieftain, was mostly treated as an underling by Rubicante, a higher-level leader. As he stated, he had never fought one-on-one with Emi (unlike Ashiya or Urushihara), and he didn’t much like his chances against her. If someone like him tried to take on such a lofty presence on pride alone, he’d just be letting her do whatever she wanted with him. So Maou could understand Libicocco’s philosophy, but...

“Where’s your spirit? Your rebel drive?!” Maou squawked.

“Hmm. Ever since I got involved in this, I’ve started to think more often that I need to save my temper for when it really counts.”

“You’re even more responsible than Ashiya!”

Compared to Ashiya, who wasn’t afraid to openly clash against Emi and Suzuno still, Libicocco seemed almost *too* ready to retreat and take the long view.

“Well, doesn’t the whole thing just seem silly to you? For example, Chiho Sasaki.”

“What about Chi?”

“Just hypothetically speaking, back in Ente Isla, we never once considered the value of a human life, did we? But, for example, if I decided I wanted to kill Chiho Sasaki for giving me some lip or the like, why would I need to debate over that at all? I could just flick my finger at her, and it is done. Hypothetically speaking, of course.”

Libicocco wanted to be sure that was understood as he breathlessly continued.

“But if I did that, it would only satisfy my urges for a few seconds, wouldn’t it? Then you, Lord Alciel, and Emilia would rip me apart, and it’d be over. I’m sure all of the Malebranche would pay for it, too. Lord Camio would likely wipe out my entire clan. Everything’s changed from when we took on Ente Isla, and if I don’t have the power to change any of that, then my only choice is to do what I can, when I can. Right?”

“R-right...”

“So, you know, no matter what Emilia says to me, as long as it’s not slander or a malicious lie, I’ve decided not to sweat the small details.”

“Y-you have...?”

Seeing Libicocco, once prone to bouts of violence, become such a perceptive, understanding person was, in a way, exactly what Maou wanted from him. He was a test subject in this grand experiment to see how demons could function in human society, and every achievement of his was a new milestone. The outlook on life he’d laid out indicated he had a grasp of *human* relationships, relationships that demanded he analyze the feelings of others and keep himself disciplined. If Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara were the first generation of demons in the human world, Libicocco was the second. The sight of him actively trying to assimilate into human society should have had Maou overjoyed.

But:

“But that’s not the *problem* right now.”

“Huh?”

“...No. I’m sorry. The way you’re thinking... Well, that’s fine. Yeah. Keep it up.”

“All right...”

What concerned Maou wasn’t Libicocco’s progress toward living in human lands. It was his own position in this.

In the end, of course, he’d have to join forces with Emi as the main weapon against heaven, violently oppressing his foes with all the power he had. That was true, but depending on how things went, that might not happen for a while. And what’s worse—here was *Libicocco* undergoing these massive changes as he adapted to his new environment, and meanwhile Maou himself wasn’t changing at all in response.

“It’s not a bad thing at all. Not at all. It’s just...”

He got turned down for a manager position. Sariel, not Maou, was able to keep up with Kisasi’s managerial approach. Chiho, not Maou, was able to stay abreast of trends and stay in contact with everyone. Naturally, he wasn’t the

kind of person to let that make him feel weak and powerless, doubting the people around him. But the whole reason the six of them had agreed to take on heaven was so that his “daughter,” Alas Ramus, could see her siblings.

“But this is my own kid...”

“No it’s not.”

Maou ignored Libicocco’s pointed response.

“This is my own kid, but here I am, keeping up my normal life and letting everyone else handle stuff, because I’m ‘too busy.’ What’s up with that?”

“I’m not sure I can tell you...but after living in Japan as long as you have, if *that’s* what you have to say, that’s not a good thing, is it?”

“I mean, it’s Emi who pays for Alas Ramus’s food and clothing. It’s Chi, or Suzuno, or Nord who plays with her; it’s all my minions who worked on presents for her. I have no idea what’s going on right now, but I’m all ‘oh, I’m busy’ to everyone. So I’m going to bathhouses, having a drink, going to sleep without trying to contact anyone... That’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Did we have a drink?”

“The milk.”

“...My liege...”

Even underneath that tiny light, the intimidating face seemed full of a strange sort of pity.

“Your Demonic Highness... If you had left with Emilia, we wouldn’t have been able to keep up at work.”

“Well, I mean, as someone who failed managerial training, that’s true in a way, but in another way, I didn’t wanna say that. It just feels like I’m escaping reality in order to feel needed in society.”

As Urushihara and Amane often reminded him, at the end of the day, Maou’s position at the Hatagaya Station McDonald was still part-time staff. There was no real way to rank them, but as a former Devil King, if asked whether to prioritize world-shifting events or his shifts at a fast-food franchise, the choice should be pretty obvious. Until now, he had Mayumi Kisaki and his chance at a

manager spot serving as goals for him, but that was all gone now.

“Am I...okay, staying like this?”

“My liege, please keep yourself together. What’s gotten into you?”

Libicocco, now legitimately worried, lurched up to his feet. Then, despite it being past one in the morning, the Room 201 doorbell rang.

“You awake, Maou? I hear voices.”

The two of them tensed up, but relaxed once they realized it was Amane Ohguro.

“Why are you here this late?” Maou asked as he unlocked the door.

“Sorry. It’s kind of a rush. I know this is sudden, but do you feel sick or anything like that?”

“Huh?”

She normally braided her hair, but it was down right now. Despite that, and the well-worn sweatsuit she had on, she looked deadly serious to them.

“No, I don’t...feel anything wrong, I guess?”

“Really?”

“Well, it was a busy day at work so I’m tired, but it’s not like I caught a cold or anything, no.”

“...All right. Well, I dunno what’s up, then. I thought it was something to do with you, but...”

Amane looked genuinely confused. It gave Maou an idea.

“...Did something happen to Acieth?”

If Amane barged in here sensing some issue with Maou, then chances were it had to do with the Yesod fragment fused within him—Acieth Alla. Amane nodded her agreement, brows furrowed.

“Nord came to visit earlier. He said something wasn’t right with her.”

“Did the landlord say anything?”

Maou had always surmised that Miki Shiba, Amane’s aunt and the landlord of

his apartment, was something besides human in nature. That turned out to be true—in fact, she was something akin to Acieth and the other Sephirah children.

“Aunt Mikitty told me to go check up on you, so that’s why I’m here. I’m sorry, but can you come with me?”

“Sure. I don’t work until later on tomorrow.”

Leaving his apartment to Libicocco, Maou followed Amane to the Shiba house next door. Something etched into his very soul repelled him from both Shiba and her residence, but if something was wrong with Acieth, there was no telling how it might affect him, to say nothing of Alas Ramus over in Ente Isla. As wary as his landlord made him, he could avoid her no longer.

“This way. I think she’s resting more now, but...I guess it was kind of rough for a while.”

Proceeding down a hallway whose wallpaper, carpeting, and colors all teamed up to intimidate him, Maou was guided into a room.

“Ah... Maou...”

There, in a bed, lay an extremely haggard-looking Acieth.

“H-hey... What happened?”

One look at the pale face and colorless lips made it clear she was ill.

“Wellllll... Sorry I make you do the worry late night. You must have tired, so I tell them no, tomorrow is fine, but...”

And if she was being *this* self-sacrificing, something had to be seriously wrong with her.

“Did you eat something you shouldn’t have?” Maou asked, going up to her bedside.

“Yeah.”

“You *did*?”

He’d meant it as a joke, which, sadly, failed. Acieth may have been a born glutton, but it wasn’t like she picked up food wrappers off the street...

“Oh, wait, you did, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re remembering, but five-second rule, I always follow it!”

“There’s definitely no evidence behind that rule, you know. What did you do?”

“I don’t know! But, you know, the timing of it, I think I understand it.”

As Acieth explained, she first began to feel sick at around ten minutes after eight this morning.

“Down to the minute, huh?”



Maou figured that was when she decided to go dumpster diving or whatever. But the situation was more serious than that:

“This morning, I ate the breakfast with Dad in his apartment. Then Emi, she send text to him...saying ‘I go to Ente Isla.’”

“Oh?”

“At the time, I think, ‘Oh, that no big deal,’ but now I think maybe that when I begin to have the sickness.”

“So it’s because Emi—or Alas Ramus, I suppose—went over there, or opened a Gate or something?”

“Maybe... I think... Me, I don’t know, either...*fwehh...*”

With a heavy sigh, Acieth shifted in her bed. The effort seemed all but suffocating to her.

“Does she have a fever or anything?” Maou asked the adjacent Amane.

She shook her head. “Not like a virus-type fever. But it looks like her illness is making her body temperature fluctuate a lot. The problem is that not even Aunt Mikitty knows what’s causing it, or how we can fix it, and also... Ah.”

“Huh?”

“Ooh.”

Amane’s face tensed up.

“Maou, hold Acieth down for me! I’ll be right back!”

“Huh? Huh?!”

“Unnnngggghhhhhh... *Hrreeehhhnnngggghhhhh!!*”

“Whaa?!”

Acieth all but sprung up from the bed, face paler than ever, and let out a belch at such a volume that Maou was sure he’d be covered in vomit. At the same time, Acieth’s entire body began to lightly glow.

“Ahhh?!”

Soon, she was emitting light from her eyes and mouth so bright, Maou

couldn't keep his own open.

“Oh, crap...?!”

Maou had seen this once before. When he went to Ente Isla's Eastern Island to save Emi, Acieth had pulled this same act after a massive meal, spewing everything she had eaten in the process and literally blowing Maou into the air. If this light was about to launch the two of them again, they might end up blowing a hole in his landlord's wall.

Reflexively, Maou deployed a barrier of demonic energy around Acieth's face in front of him.

“Agghphh?!”

“Huhh?!”

But the light deflected by the barrier bounced right back onto Acieth's face, sending her jaw upward and turning her head toward the ceiling.

“Aaahhhhhh!”

It didn't destroy it all at once, but the beam of light began to singe the ceiling. The thought of paying restitution promptly began to torment Maou's mind.

“H-how am I supposed to hold *this* down?!”

He tried to hold Acieth back down—the recoil from this light beam against the ceiling seemed to be arching her entire body backward. But that light looked like it'd destroy pretty much anything it touched. He couldn't point her face away from where it already was angled.

But then:

“Maou! Out of the way!”

With a massive rush of force, Maou was tossed to the side—replaced by Amene, carrying something oddly large in one hand.

“Hyahh!”

She smacked it point-blank against Acieth's face. There was a dull *thud* as sprays of red flew around the room.

“Ah... Amene, what are...?! Amene... Amene?”

At first, Maou thought Amane had smashed Acieth in the face with a blunt weapon. But when he opened his eyes, he was greeted by what, for all the world, looked like half of a watermelon. Its red flesh and juice were splattered all over the room. The searing light was gone, and then...

“...mnch...mnch...”

...they could hear the sound of Acieth, face buried in the fruit, chewing away.

“Huhh?”

“We need to have her eat...or else *this* happens.”

“...Whaaaaaat?!”

“It’s been like this since this evening. She needs to have something in her mouth at all times, or else that crazy light shoots out of her eyes and mouth and she starts breaking stuff. Aunt Mikitty says the Sephirah is probably falling out of control, but if we don’t know what’s triggering or causing it, there’s nothing we can do...”

“Chomp...chomp...”

Acieth’s face was buried in the fruit enough that Maou was concerned about her breathing. She showed no sign of extracting herself. As he struggled to grasp this situation, her face went deep and deeper into the semicircular rind, until she began making gnawing, rasping sounds he didn’t know were possible with a watermelon.

“...Done.”

Now every edible piece of it was thoroughly picked over. She lifted the edge of her nose and her mouth from the bottom of the rind, triumphant.

“So again, let me ask...”

“Yeah?”

“Maou, are you sure you don’t feel sick?”

“I think I’m about to be.”

Just watching this charade, feeling his skin itch from the watermelon juice that covered it, thinking about all the reds and pinks that would never come out

in the wash—at the very least, it was starting to depress him. Even discounting the physical damage, the fact he had been powerless the past few minutes to help at all made him feel even worse. He *did* want to help his friends, now fighting their own battles in faraway places. What he *didn't* want to do was deal with Acieth, facing unprecedented trouble even as she was wearing the rind like some kind of demented Halloween mask.

“Roughly, she needs at least around four rice balls every ten minutes.”

The voice from Amane sounded desperate as it entered Maou's ears. He didn't bother asking what she meant.



“Um, are you all right?”

Maou would finally make it back in the early-morning hours, when he was greeted by a Libicocco who clearly hadn't got a wink of sleep.

“Emilia's father just came up, and he said you might be in some kind of trouble...”

“Yeah, I just traded places with him... I'm so tired... I'm sorry, just let me sleep for now.”

“Oh, er, okay. Do you need an alarm?”

“No... I already set it.”

“Right. Well, I'll make some breakfast, so eat it whenever you can. Also—”

“I don't need breakfast. Give it to Amane or Nord when you go out.”

“What?!”

Ordering his underlings to feed breakfast to their neighbors was well out of the norm for Maou.

“...*Please*. Just do it. I'll explain later.”

Something about the way he put it made Libicocco shiver with fear. He nodded and cleared his throat.

“But were you about to say something just now?”

“Ah, yes. Um, Emilia's father asked to borrow some miso from me for some

reason, so I let him have it. I couldn't say *what* he needs it for, but—"

"Borrowing miso? What's next, a cup of sugar?"

But Maou knew exactly what Nord was thinking. Acieth had some disease where she had to be constantly fed at all times. Presumably, he was trying to add some variety to the menu. Maou had only seen people borrow food ingredients from neighbors in manga from decades ago, but he understood all the same.

Then another thought occurred to him.

"...Wait. Nah, it couldn't be..."

He looked at his refrigerator, his mind in a haze. Then his lips began to curl upward.

"Ashiya and Suzuno did it all the time, didn't they?"

"Hmm?"

"...Ahhh... Well, I'm sure you know this, but don't ask for miso back from Nord. I'm pretty sure he's gonna pay you back with something else, but whatever it is, just accept it, all right?"

"A-all right. I need to get going, so you just want me to take this to Amane Ohguro, then?"

Libicocco, a little reluctant, neatly wrapped the sausage and eggs he'd just whipped up and took the plate out the door with him. Seeing him go, Maou finally collapsed into his futon.

"Maybe I can get three hours," he said as he closed his eyes, hoping to get as much sleep as he could before work.

"No! Wait, wait, *wait*!!"

Then his body spasmed back up.

"What am I doing in a daze here? Now's not the *time* for this!"

How could he not have noticed until now?

"Alas Ramus must be okay, right? Emi hasn't contacted me at all!"

Acieth and Alas Ramus were sisters. If one of them was acting strange, something was likely to manifest itself in the other, like twins. Right around when Emi took Alas Ramus with her to Ente Isla, Acieth began to feel weird, she had said. It wouldn't be unthinkable to see the same thing happen to Alas Ramus.

"Damn it... But the Central Continent... No, I can't, they're monitoring it... But maybe it's better than nothing? No... I'd better contact Farfarello first..."

But not only was he on duty all day yesterday, it was the busiest day so far in the Iwaki era. He followed that up with a night of kitchen duty for Acieth, bringing his brain to the brink of utter exhaustion. With Amane and Shiba right nearby, and with all their stores of demonic force drained after dealing with Kinanna, Maou only had the strength of a typical young man. The fatigue was starting to give him a physical headache.

"An Idea Link... No, if it's demonic force, they'll catch it. I could have someone use the feather pen to open a Gate... I need to call... Chi, or Rika Suzuki... Ah, dammit, Chi's at school right now..."

Was it fatigue behind that headache, or was Acieth's illness affecting *him* now? He didn't know, but it made focusing hard for him. And with every moment, the clock kept ticking, robbing him of more and more sleep time.

"Rika Suzuki... Will she answer...? No... I'm gonna have to text Chi and get Acieth's thing worked out... Damn it... No, no, I've already bothered her enough with the whole Suzuno thing..."

The fatigue and sleepiness made it no longer possible to keep his head up straight. Then, suddenly, he felt something next to him. A gentle voice whispered into his ear.

"You look awful. Sleep a little."

"I can't right now. I need to get in contact, or..."

"I understand the situation. You have work today, do you not? So sleep. I will handle the necessary contacts and arrangements as best I can. Do not worry."

"Oh... Well, sorry... I'll just close my eyes for a bit, then..."

Within his hazy consciousness, Maou had just entrusted...someone...to do... something.

And then that consciousness swiftly left him.

What felt like an instant later, his phone's alarm grated against his ears as he opened his eyes again. He felt a dull throb on his temples and behind his eyes; it didn't feel like he'd slept at all, but the phone's screen had cruelly advanced three hours nonetheless.

"...Water..."

He had gone to bed without brushing his teeth, so his mouth felt all gross. Rinsing it out, he noticed something placed on the living room table.

"Ahh?"

It was a note whose content—and whose handwriting—were totally unexpected.

Rice balls and miso soup in the refrigerator

There was no signature, but the writing was familiar to Maou. Opening the fridge, he found three large rice balls and a small, covered pot. Waves of appreciation enveloped him, even as he pondered how this feat could've been engineered.

"Oh, are you up? You need to go soon, no? Did you eat?"

Now, for some reason, the creator of this impromptu breakfast was inviting herself through his front door.

"...What are you doing *here*?"

"Is it that strange for a woman to return to her own home?"

Standing there, in a familiar kimono and apron, was Suzuno Kamazuki.



As he sipped the miso soup Suzuno had reheated for him, taking pains to keep his back up straight, Maou glanced at her, seated diagonally from him. The first question that crossed his mind was whether, after just coming home from her Archbishop ordination, it was safe for her to come back again so soon.

The second was...

“Mm? What is it?”

“Oh, um, nothing.”

“Ah.”

Suzuno cast her eyes down again.

This listlessness was the big question in Maou’s mind. Her head and her vision both were pointed slightly downward. When she spoke, her speech began and ended with less sharpness than before. She might just be tired out, he thought, but if so, her hazily sitting here as Maou finished eating was incomprehensible.

She had prepared food for him many a time in the past, but almost never on a one-on-one basis like this. Maybe never at all, in fact. They had eaten together more times than he could count so he couldn’t say for sure, but either way, just sitting there, waiting for him to finish, was something Suzuno would never do normally.

“Um, so what are you doing?”

“Mm? Oh, you mean this dress?” She glanced down at herself. “Libicocco told me as he was leaving that Acieth was having some manner of trouble. When I asked Shiba, she said they had to keep Acieth continually fed, so I helped them.”

“...Oh. Hard, wasn’t it?”

After making rice balls until sunrise, Maou meant that from the heart, to some extent. But Suzuno just smiled a bit, shaking her head.

“It was nothing too exerting. Acieth’s appetite is hardly surprising news by this point. In fact, only Nord would know better how to satisfy her than me.”

She might be right.

“Are you done? I will do the dishes, so get ready for work.”

“O-okay...but Acieth...”

“Do not let it concern you. Me, Nord, and Amare will take care of her together. I will place a call to your restaurant if something happens. Just focus

on your work like always.”

“Ah... All right. Sure. But...”

“If you are worried for Alas Ramus, then my apologies, but we can only reach out to them through Farfarello. I cannot say if they will receive the message immediately, but it is the best we can do.”

She had looked ahead to all of Maou’s concerns and addressed all of them in advance. He honestly appreciated that.

“Okay. Um, sorry about all this.”

“Not a problem,” Suzuno said as she nimbly took Maou’s place setting to the kitchen sink. Maou watched her go. The sight of her rinsing seemed like the Suzuno he knew, but something seemed off; something he couldn’t place his finger on. He started preparing for work anyway.

“Oh, hey, uh...”

“I have *no* intention of turning toward you. If you intend to change clothes, make it quick.”

Once again, she’d read his mind. And this time, the answer was “just do it.”

“N-no, I really can’t...”

Maou really couldn’t. Changing in the same room as a woman took a certain bravery that he couldn’t summon right now.

“Why are you acting like that at this point?” Suzuno turned and smiled at him, not a hint of malice on her face. “If I recall, you opted to attack me in your underpants because your uniform was borrowed and you wanted to keep it intact.”

“No, um, that’s kind of a different story...and *you* attacked *me* first, you know! Also, stop phrasing it so I sound like a dumbass!”

“My *phrasing* is the issue? I believe that Chiho and Emilia were there as well, were they not? No shirt, no pants, and you going on about the elasticity of your boxers or whatnot...”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m *sorry*! You win! Just turn the hell around!”

Having Suzuno rehash a moment from when they'd first met left Maou with no space to defend himself. By the time he'd quickly changed while Suzuno's eyes focused on the sink, it was time to head for work.

"Leaving?" Suzuno asked.

"Y-yeah. For today."

"You have to close tonight, do you not? Libicocco said so."

"Oh, he did? So you..."

"I will stay in my apartment for the night. I thought it needed a cleaning the last time I returned, so I will take care of that...and I worry for Acieth, of course."

"...All right. Um, don't overexert yourself."

He wasn't sure what he meant by that. But he said it anyway.

"Right. Take care now."

"S-see you."

Maou trundled himself out the door, as if fleeing Suzuno's weird vibes. Seeing Shiba's house outside made him concerned for Acieth, but he moved on. There was nothing else he could do today.

His shift started at eleven, and already the MgRonalD was seeing signs of another crowded day. He sprint-walked to the staff room and changed into his uniform. As he did, his house key slipped out of his pants pocket and clinked against the floor. He picked it up, returned it to his pocket...and then it hit him.

"Wait... Suzuno doesn't have the key to my place, does she?"



"Ugghh..."

She just couldn't stop heaving those dry, heavy sighs.

"I just can't stop thinking about it..."

Chiho had quit her job, taken a step away from Ente Isla's troubles, and intended to push herself into the world of college exams. Now, with a self-deprecating smile, she looked down at the city outside her window. From this

room at the Hatagaya location of the Senshu Academy test-prep center, she had a bird's-eye view of both the MgRonald and the Sentucky Fried Location across the street from it.

Chiho had chosen this location of Senshu Academy, in a mixed-use building along the shopping arcade jutting out from Hatagaya Station, because they had a good individual tutoring program. Since she was starting exam prep a little later than the average, she would need to narrow down her list of schools and formulate a learning plan for them pretty fast. This was the only academy within her sphere of activity that could potentially bring her to a level worthy of the schools she hoped for, even starting in late April as she had.

“This is so awkward...”

But the final session of this center didn't end until nine forty-five in the evening. Everyone had to be out by ten; in other words, she'd be getting home the same time as when she worked at MgRonald.

Her mind *was* working now, sort of, but not exactly on college prep.

“Focus... Focus...”

If she was saying this out loud to herself, it was pretty clear that Step Two of college prep was tripping her up.

Even now, as she sat there, someone might be facing a crisis in Ente Isla. Even in the shorter shifts she walked away from, the crew might be facing huge crowds and massive hardship. And maybe she'd run into Maou on the way home.

“Uggh...”

If there was any real difference between now and before, it was that between Chiho's school and test-prep schedule, she had the time to stop by home and change clothes on most days. She usually reported to MgRonald in her school uniform, so getting to walk down the shopping arcade in a normal outfit felt somehow novel.

“I won't have the time for stops along the way, though...”

With its one-on-one instruction, Senshu Academy's students didn't interact

with one another much at all. Sadly, her friends Yoshiya Kohmura and Kaori Shoji had already signed on to different exam centers by the time she joined this one. There may be other Sasahata North High School students coming here, but Chiho hadn't recognized anyone yet—and she was here to study anyway, not to expand her friend circle.

For the time being, Chiho had spoken only with the assistant teachers here at this Hatagaya location. The test-prep site she went to during middle school boasted of smaller teacher-student ratios, but even then, she was taking classes with around ten other kids at once. It thus took some time for her to get used to Senshu Academy's system of prerecorded classes, with a class leader and assistants on hand to provide additional guidance as needed.

As her assistant put it, she wouldn't prosper in this system if she wasn't prepared to learn—so if she *could* master it, it would make college life a lot easier. In an environment like college, which didn't offer a uniform learning experience, being proactive was apparently key.

The assistant sounded like she knew what she was talking about, although Chiho was surprised when she found out she was a college student herself, working part-time here. There were four assistants, each attending famous name-brand universities in Tokyo and each naturally earning stellar grades. Their own exam memories were still fresh in their minds, theoretically letting them offer guidance on a more personal level. Teaching in a center like this meant being involved with the futures of a lot of people at once, so Chiho assumed all the staff had to be full-time salaried workers—but here, having the assistants be real-life college students was one of the attractions. Since the schools they attended were likely being targeted by many of the students at Senshu, the center had a reputation for providing a lot of on-the-field info about life at those universities, the sort of thing websites and pamphlets left out. To Chiho, learning that people did jobs like this, too, was a real eye-opener.

“I wonder if I'll be like that in two more years?”

In her eyes, the assistants, all aged twenty-ish, were no different from the “grown-ups” she'd interacted with on a daily basis. Even now, they already had the aura of adulthood that she saw in Kisaki and Iwaki. But in chronological terms, she herself was only two or three years away from that.

“Suzuki... Akiko... Shimizu...”

Chiho recalled the “adults” close to her who were the same age as the academy’s assistants. Rika Suzuki, Akiko Ohki, and Maki Shimizu were all, in different ways from the staff here, grown women to her. She wasn’t shallow enough to think it just naturally *happened* once you reached that age...but clearly, it took more than just reading books and taking quizzes to turn out like them.

“Hmmm...”

After all, her relationships tended to put her in a “youngest child” role a lot. That applied with Maou and the other Ente Islands, of course, but even Kaori Shoji tended to take the initiative a lot in their friendship. She had no deep relations with the younger people in her archery club—they mostly gathered around Yoshiya Kohmura, since they had all gone to the same middle school.

As she thought about it, Chiho began to feel like she had always “looked up” to someone, ever since she was tiny. Very early on, it was her cousin in Nagano. Starting in high school, it was her seniors in *kyudo*, with their fancy white bamboo bows. Now she couldn’t stop comparing herself with the adults in her social circles, and it wasn’t enough to tell her how to carry on.

Everyone around her said there was no need to panic, and that sounded reasonable whenever Chiho heard it. But now that things had changed and she was back to being a simple high schooler, she had this looming dread she had let much more time pass without thinking about her future than she’d realized.

Even worse, she wasn’t at all a bad student to start with. She could keep up with the first set of courses she took at Senshu well enough, and she scored well on the occasional tests to measure her progress. But turn that around, and she didn’t really know what to aim for beyond achieving “good results”—and after two months of coming here, she just couldn’t put her mind into the coursework.

Maki Shimizu had told her to try to keep as many options open as possible for herself. Rika had advised her of the importance of bringing people close to her, rather than trying to adjust herself for other people. Kisaki had said that, if she valued Maou, she had to prioritize herself first for now. But after she put herself

first, what should come next? Mentally, the process was going so slowly, she could hardly stand it. It felt like this problem drove her to rock bottom like clockwork once a month—and whenever she felt like she had a solution afterward, the slightest change in environment would shake her all over again.

“What do I want...to do, huh...? ...Ah.”

And even as she thought about this, she was writing up the core points of the video lecture in her notes. It astounded her.

She remained in this daze until the end of the period. Coming to, she looked up at the clock, noticing the people around her gathering their things.

“Um... I don’t have any class tomorrow, but can I use the study rooms anyway?”

A vague feeling gripped her that studying at home was like a magnet for phone calls from other planets, so for the past few days, she had been taking full advantage of the academy’s study spaces. Of course, if someone reached out to her from Ente Isla, there had to be an emergency going on. She wasn’t trying to ignore any of that, but...

“Ah...”

...but unluckily for her, the study spaces were already reserved for the times Chiho could use them. She thought about maybe working something out with her teaching assistant, but—again unluckily—that assistant was currently dealing with four or five students at once, so she wouldn’t be free for a while.

“Well, so much for tomorrow, I guess. Have a good night!”

Aoki, the teaching assistant who was also a student at Waseta University like Maki Shimizu, called out to her as she turned around. “Oh, you too! Take care!”

Chiho turned back and nodded as she left, taking in the fresh Hatagaya air and marveling at how much nicer it was outside these days.

“Mmmh...!”

She had been seated the whole time, so her back muscles were all knotted up. Stretching herself out, she was about to take a glance at the McDonald and head on home when something stopped her.

“Heeey.”

“Huh?”

The voice directed at her was so casual, it instantly made Chiho turn around.

Then, realizing she was being surrounded by three unfamiliar men, she began to grow wary. “...What do you want?”

They didn’t seem much older than she was, but she had never met any of them before. This was probably...

“You go to Senshu Academy? I do, too, but you wrapped up for the day, right? If you’re hungry, you wanna have dinner together? Like, at the Mag or Sentucky?”

She had never experienced it before, but this was a classic pickup line. The man said he went to her academy, but he was clearly dressed for a casual night on the town—and she had never seen him there before.

This had never happened to her once after leaving her part-time job, and yet here she was.

Chiho visibly winced. It being her last year in high school, she thought going back to the more typical role of an aspiring college student would lead to some changes in her life—but she didn’t want anything as dumb as this. She had walked here, like she usually did for her job, but it looked like her bicycle would be a safer bet from now on.

“I’m tired, so I’m going home.”

It was ten in the evening, but the plaza in front of Hatagaya Station still had a lot of people. Figuring these pickup artists wouldn’t try anything too rough out here, Chiho tried to sidestep them and get out from their circle.

“Aw, c’mon, you’re just gonna study at home anyway, aren’t you? You oughtta get something sweet in you so your brain can work better.”

The man who spoke first unexpectedly took action, stepping in front of the direction Chiho pointed herself.

“I don’t want to eat with someone I don’t know, so—”

“Hey, we’re both Senshu students. Let’s get to know each other. Maybe give each other some tips.”

“...Haaah.”

Chiho sighed. This was most unwelcome.

There was no way to tell whether they actually attended the cram school or not, but Chiho was in no mood to play along; she didn’t owe anything to the prep center, or to McGonald or Sentucky for that matter. But if they really *did* go to Senshu and she complained to the headmaster, it might just create more trouble for her, depending on what the school did. She didn’t want to forcibly brush them off only to be ambushed in some dark alleyway, so she decided the smartest thing was to join them at McGonald and seek out someone’s help when the time was right.

But then she noticed something. She shrugged her shoulders and gave the group a light nod. The young men, taking this as a sign of resigned agreement, flashed grins that didn’t exactly mark them as high-class people.

“Okay, cool! How ’bout we go sing some karaoke somewhere? Work some of that stress off!”

Chiho glared at the man. She didn’t know what was so “okay, cool” about that.

“Weren’t you taking me to dinner?”

“Hey, they got food at karaoke, too. You know that, right? So come on.”

Then, acting too familiar for his own good, he tried to grab Chiho’s hand.

“Don’t touch me, please,” she said in a slightly stronger tone of voice, brushing off the advance.

“Oops... Oh, you don’t need to act all stuck-up like—”

“Did you not hear me? I said don’t touch me.”

“...Look, I know we’re not exactly Prince Charming or whatever, but I’m not asking you to *do* anything...”

“And I’m telling you: Do. Not. Touch me. All right? I think it’s about time you

gave up.”

“Whoa, why’re you glaring like that...?”

“Because I have to.”

“Hey!”

Suddenly, a deep, rumbling voice rang out as a gigantic shadow loomed over the men:

“The hell you people doing?”

“Huh? What’re...ah...?”

The men turned around, a bit surprised, only to find a sight that dominated the whole of their vision. It surprised them even more—his frame was easily bigger than the three of them put together, his deeply chiseled chin only adding to the intimidation.

“Uh... Ah, ah...oh...”

Considering the bravado they’d begun their advances with, the men didn’t seem quite so used to people challenging them on the street. The presence of Libicocco in street clothes completely destroyed their confidence.

“What do you guys want with our boss?”

“B-boss?! ”

Chiho chuckled as the would-be pickup artists started to tremble. ““Boss’...? Well, I *guess* you’re not totally wrong, but...”

“This way, Boss.”

“Right. Sorry to bother you.”

Called over by Libicocco, Chiho sauntered out of the men’s circle and hid behind his back.

“So. If you got business with the boss, what is it?”

“N-no, um...excuse me...”

As the man tried to sidle away, Libicocco used his rumbling voice to land the telling blow:

“Hey, kid. I work right nearby here, okay? If you try pulling this crap within sight of me again... You *get* me?”

“Eep...!”

With a yelp, the pickup artists fled into the crowds. After watching them go, Chiho let out a light sigh and bowed to Libicocco.

“Thank you. Sorry about that.”

“A couple of blows could’ve easily floored those humans. What were you *doing*?”

It was a non sequitur of a comment following her thanks, but Chiho laughed it off and shook her head.

“Well, I don’t have any attack moves I can pull off with my bare hands.”

“...I still can’t help but wonder why you stood up to me back then.”

Libicocco was talking about their first encounter, on the roof of Sasahata North High School.

“Well, then and now, I liked my chances of winning...or, you could say, I had an escape valve.”

“Did you? If I hadn’t finished my shift just now...”

“Sure. There’s a lot of people on this street, so if I’d started yelling or running, someone would’ve stepped up.”

“Most people ignore that, yes? I saw it on TV.”

A demon chieftain from the Malebranche tribe “saw it on TV.” Chiho found it hilarious, but she was just as aware of that.

“Oh, I would’ve been fine. Ms. Iwaki and Sariel are here, too, and nobody working at MgRonald would ignore trouble outside. They wouldn’t have that many customers at this time of night, either. So along *those* lines, I wasn’t scared at all.”

“Acting like you own this city...”

Libicocco almost looked disgusted at this but followed it up with a dumbfounded smile. Chiho smiled with him.

“In *that* case, I’m sorry I barged in.”

“Oh? No, don’t be! You really helped a lot. I could see you approach us, too, which helped me keep my head together.”

“Yes, but at a time like that, wouldn’t you want His Demonic Highness coming for you?”

He acted so normal saying that—he meant every word of it, too—that Chiho didn’t react for a moment.

“Even you think that way, Libicocco...?”

“No, I think one of Emilia’s friends said it.”

Why did Rika wind up talking about *that* with him? And why did he so readily accept it?

“After last night’s difficulties, my liege was exhausted all day. If you like, I could accompany you home.”

Chiho was ready to accept the offer. She was already curious about what these “difficulties” were, but:

“...Ah, I see. Well, tell him I said not to overexert himself.”

“Certainly.”

He did not tell Chiho about said difficulties. And on the way home, Chiho never tried asking Libicocco about them. Libicocco, perhaps picking up on this subtlety and never the chatty type in the first place, was mostly silent the whole way.

“...Well. It may not be for me to say, but don’t work yourself too hard. See you.”

“Right. Thank you very much. You take care, too, Libicocco.”

They parted ways at Chiho’s front door, completely like normal, and then Libicocco headed home.

Back in her room, Chiho put today’s textbooks and notes on her desk then went downstairs to the living room, where her mother presumably had a meal coming for her. In another moment, Chiho was watching her mother’s news

program as she waited for dinner to be reheated.

Listening to the newscaster act all excited about international soccer scores, Chiho tried to imagine the difficulties Maou might be facing. It probably wasn't any devastating event on Ente Isla—if it was, Libicocco would've surely broken the news to her first thing, and someone else would've rung up her phone by now. But if it wasn't, something unexpected must've happened either at his apartment or at MgRonald.

“...He realizes he can always call me...”

“What was that, Chiho?”

“Ahh, nothing.”

Even she thought she was being unreasonable. Just the other day, she was complaining to Maou about being treated like a switchboard operator. Libicocco was there to hear it, and that was likely why he opted not to tell Chiho anything she didn't ask about.

“Okay, it's ready.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Picking at the reheated leftovers, Chiho mulled over her thoughts. Was Maou eating all right? Was life alone with Libicocco affecting his food habits for the worse? Acieth wasn't sponging off him, was she?

...How is everyone doing?

“Something up, Chiho? Is it still cold?”

Her mother noticed her rather slow pace. Chiho just shook her head and consciously tried to speed herself up. She was done by the time the news ended, so she hopped back up to her room to “go over today's classwork.”

Once the door was shut, she completely ignored the study desk she'd laid out yesterday, collapsed on her bed, and hugged a pillow.

“...Why can't Suzuno just quit her Archbishop job?”

Again, Chiho was being unreasonable.

All the pain Suzuno was enduring in Ente Isla—and even her appointment to

Archbishop, for that matter—was because of the wishes of Alas Ramus, and of the six people gathered in that apartment.

But still, Chiho couldn't help but think that while Suzuno occupied Room 202, she would have a valid reason to visit Villa Rosa Sasazuka. With her around, Chiho could visit that apartment without worrying her mother. If she called up Suzuno and asked if she could use Room 202 like her personal study space when Suzuno was out, she'd be able to check up on Maou and the gang at any time. If Suzuno was still on Earth, Chiho could keep tabs on them, making sure they didn't resort to junk food all day.

It was a selfish, self-serving thing to imagine.

"...If only...I had the kind of power Suzuno has..."

Her cleaning abilities, her fighting skills, her spirit, her broad-mindedness, her intelligence, and her age—no matter the category, she could never take on Suzuno and win. Suzuno, more than anyone else, was the adult woman she was closest to in her life. Even in this situation, she was working right alongside Maou with his full trust...and from the bottom of her heart, Chiho envied her.

"Ugghh... I'm sorry, Suzuno."

Chiho apologized aloud for imagining Suzuno in vain. Suzuno had her own pains and distresses, things only she could understand. Only through lots of effort and struggling did she get to where she was today, but Chiho imagining herself teleporting straight into her position was beyond despicable. Still, her brain refused to stop imagining it.

This had happened before. Thanks to something beyond stupid, she'd let her jealousy for Emi get the best of her one winter's day—the day she'd learned just how shallow and superficial she herself was. Come to think of it, it was Suzuno who'd consoled her back then, too, wasn't it?

What would it take for Chiho to become a grown woman, like Emi, or Suzuno, or Rika or Akiko or Maki or Iwaki or Kisaki?

I don't know. I don't know.

Would she start to see how if she focused on her studies like any other kid, got admitted into a university, and led a college life like anyone else's?

She didn't feel that way at all. She didn't feel like she could accomplish much of anything.

What had she done up to today? What had she achieved? Even when she'd obtained the Spear of Adramelechinus, it was Suzuno calling the shots for her. It wasn't Chiho who had engineered that miracle—she had just stood in the center of it. *That* was the work of Suzuno for planning it, Adramelech for staying so attached to that land, and Dhin Dhem Wurs, Laila, Nord, Rika, Acieth, and Libicocco for making all the arrangements.

It wasn't my power at all.

"...Nnngh..."

If her mind was stuck in this rut, she could easily run out and go to Room 201 right this minute. But the serious-minded, commonsense side stopped her, telling her that it wouldn't solve anything. That normal side of her—gifted at acting like a good girl, even though she couldn't even *do* anything—annoyed her. It was that side of her that took advice from people and had brought her to this point. So why did she want to throw in the towel after just a few days?

She wanted to scold herself. This was only the first wall to overcome. It was just like cutting down on your friends, your extracurriculars, your work, and your play for the sake of studying.

...No.

Something in her denied it.

It was all just a dream.

The whole Ente Isla thing was a dream, one Chiho only wished were true. Like a kid good at sports who wanted to turn pro someday. Like a kid addicted to manga who wanted to draw it for a living. Like a kid dreaming of being a big movie star. Ente Isla was a dream Chiho wanted to reach for in her life. But did that dream connect to the other end of the path she was trying to take? How could she connect it to the dream ahead?

I don't know. I don't know.

"Ahh... I just...nnnggh..."

She just wanted someone to notice these pointless feelings she had. Her frustration made her groan. She couldn't let her mother hear her, so she buried her face in her pillow, but it still made her groan.

She had no idea her heart was this weak. She had gotten too confident. Ashiya, and Suzuno, and Emi and Emeralda had given her all this praise, and she was deluded into thinking she was a strong person. Instead, she was nothing at all special. Left alone, she couldn't fend off a pack of guys on the town. A few days of going to test prep, and she was already looking for excuses not to study. She was comparing the good points of her best friends with the worst points of herself, just wallowing in inferiority. She was a hopeless, helpless, spoiled child.

This must have been exactly why Maou never gave a reply to her confession. She was going to be like this for years, wasn't she? Maou would forget all about her feelings, and then he'd probably stay in Ente Isla for good, handling this war against heaven she wasn't even a part of.

She hated that so much.

She wanted to hang out and eat with everyone again. She wanted to cook with Ashiya and Suzuno; she wanted to play with Alas Ramus alongside the reluctant Urushihara; she wanted to comfort Maou whenever Yusa said something he didn't like.

If Suzuno became an Archbishop... If Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara created a new "demon race" in Ente Isla from their subjects in the demon realms... If Yusa brought Alas Ramus back to her family...

Those days would never come back. They *couldn't*.

And I don't have the right, nor the power, nor the value to demand that from everyone.

Because I'm the only human from Japan among them.

"...Hmm?"

And then she detected a trace of holy energy in the air.

Chiho lifted her face up from the pillow. It was just a tiny sliver, but after several days away from everyone, she was sensitive to that little change. It was

leaking out from her desk drawer, and she knew what it was from.

From the drawer, she took out a small box.

“Is this...?”

Her ring, ensconced with a Yesod fragment, was lightly glowing. Apart from that, nothing was happening—but this was like nothing before now. Unless Chiho or someone else applied force to it, the fragment was just a jewel, transparent and a shade of pink. That was it.

“...”

Holding the box with the ring in it to her chest, Chiho thought for a moment.



“Whoa, what’s that?”

The fatigue made Maou waver a bit as he pointed at something in the corner of the room. Libicocco, perhaps expecting the question, gave him a baffled look as he pointed at the wall separating them from Room 202.

“Huh? She brought it over here? And then just left it?”

They couldn’t be blamed for their confusion. When Libicocco made it back home, he found that Room 201 now had what looked like a bladeless electric fan in the corner.

“Looks like it, my liege.”

“What’s her deal? I wanna ask, but I doubt she’s awake now. Her light’s out. When did you make it back home?”

“A little past eleven, I think. I stopped by the bathhouse.”

“Huh? Don’t you get off at ten? Did you go somewhere else?”

“Oh, umm...” Libicocco paused for a moment. “I...ran into Chiho Sasaki on the way.”

“Chi?”

“Yes. And, well, given how things were, I took her back home.”

“...Oh. Well, thank you.”

Libicocco sounded hesitant, but Maou, for his part, felt it best to avoid actively discussing Chiho as well for now. Apart from a few words of encouragement, he didn't ask for any more details.

"It's still a bit early, but maybe it was hot in here? That was mean of us. We never gave her a key, so she must've not been able to leave the building."

"...No, she said she went shopping and visited the landlord like normal."

"She did?"

Maou found himself poking at Suzuno, unavailable to defend herself, even though he knew it was pretty well impossible for any burglar to target his apartment. There wasn't anything worth stealing in the first place, either.

"Hmm? So, again, why did she leave this here? And what about *this*?"

The fan wasn't the only new member of the family.

"This *has* to be Suzuno's. What could she be doing?"

On top of the refrigerator was perched a small stand mixer. They didn't need any confirmation to know it didn't belong to Room 201, so Suzuno must've brought it in for some reason.

"Ah, well. We can ask her tomorrow...and if Suzuno went to bed without contacting me, things must be chill with Acieth for now. I'm beat, so I wanna get some sleep. I'll put down a futon."

"My liege, you start work tomorrow morning with me as well, don't you?"

"No, I begged Ms. Iwaki to change me to the afternoon. Luckily, I guess they were able to work it out with another location. I'm worried about Acieth, so..."

"Bell said she went over to cook or something crazy like that, but what happened anyway?"

"I don't really know myself...but I think it's a sign of something bad comin' our way."

Acieth's illness simply amplified existing anxieties about the battle against heaven. Acieth had proven to be well-on unstoppable against the space-suited figure. In Heavensky, and at Sasahata North High, she had saved Maou's hide on

several occasions. He didn't want to totally rely on her, but Acieth, just like Alas Ramus, was a Sephirah child who needed rescue. He didn't want her to set out for the final battle while sick with...whatever this was.

"Oh, did Suzuno say anything about Ente Isla? Why did she come back home in the first place?"

"She didn't say anything in particular. She was napping in this room when I arrived."

"Huhh?"

Something *was* off. The last time Suzuno was home, her promotion to Archbishop had clearly shocked her. She and Chiho went out for udon noodles that night, discussing their future strategy, and she seemed to be reassured enough when she left. But maybe she wasn't totally convinced yet. She'd never run off and abandon her role, of course, but it looked like he'd need to discuss matters with her.

"Humans can be a handful, can't they?"

"Well, that's gonna be part of the equation from now on. Let's put down our futons. They're in the closet... Whoa, what's this?"

Opening the closet door, in the middle cubbyhole Urushihara usually called home, Maou found a large, unfamiliar machine sitting there. Not "unfamiliar" in that it didn't belong to him, but in that he had no idea what it might be for.

"This may be worse than we thought..."

Suzuno had to be behind this. At this point, the thought of meeting her tomorrow scared him a little.

The next morning, about an hour after Libicocco had wrapped up breakfast and gone out for his all-day shift, Maou could hear Suzuno suddenly spring to life in the next room over. He winced at the noise—like she was moving something heavy around—but looking at his phone screen, he saw that it was late enough that he might as well get moving, so he rolled out of his futon and crept out the door.

"Ah...Devil King. My apologies. Did I awaken you?"

Suzuno was out in the corridor as well, and for reasons only she knew, she was carrying a microwave oven.

“N-no, it’s fine...but what’re you doing this early in the morning?”

Suzuno bashfully turned her eyes away.

“Well... It is oversize garbage day...so I am taking some out.”

“Oversize garbage day? You’re gonna throw that microwave away?”

Taking a closer look at the appliance, he saw that it had a sticker on the side indicating Suzuno had paid the required fee to Shibuya Ward’s sanitation department to have the garbage men haul it off. Despite that, it was definitely newer than the oven in Room 201, the buttons on it offering far more features.

“Hey, by the way—what’s been your deal since yesterday?”

“...There is nothing at all,” Suzuno replied, averting her eyes again.

Maou rolled his own. “Look, if you’re gonna lie, at least try to make it a good one, okay? Or act in a way that’s not gonna make me suspect the worst. Shouldn’t your line of work back home make that easy for you?”

“L-lay off of me. Out of my way, please. I need to bring this out front by nine AM.”

Her eyes, wincing and still pointed away from Maou, had faint dark circles below them. Maou winced his face even harder than she did and snatched the microwave from her hands.

“Will you quit playing stupid? Give it to me!”

“Ah! What are you doing?!”

“This is too nice to throw out, so I’m taking it. Now I’m sure of it! You’re trying to palm off that fan and the mystery machine in the closet on me, aren’t you? What the heck is that thing anyway? It’s huge and has a big-ass pipe stickin’ out of it.”

“It...is a futon dryer.”

“A futon dryer?”

The machine’s shape didn’t indicate that at all to him. Maou felt like he was

about to lose his mind. Suzuno, taking this to mean she was being made fun of, began to blush as she turned her head down.

“That was my purchase, but I hardly used it at all...and I would prefer it did not go to waste.”

“I hate you so much. If you’re gonna throw stuff out, throw *that* out first! What do you think would happen if people knew you tossed this brand-new microwave? Ashiya would have the hissy fit of a lifetime, and it’s not even his.”

“It—it is none of his business. Besides, it is my property. I may do with it what I please—”

“Look, *Great Demon General Crestia Bell*, if a subordinate’s acting out of line, it’s their superior officer’s job to do something about it before it is too late.”

“Nrgh...”

Suzuno had taken advantage of her rank in the demon realms to make assorted demands of the Devil King Satan in the past. Having a chance to get back at her gave Maou a bit of a thrill—but seeing Suzuno stare at her feet, keeping her head down, kept the rush from lasting long.

“I’m not due at work till later. Come in for a late breakfast.”

“What?”

Suzuno flashed Maou a quizzical look at the sudden invite. Now it was Maou averting his eyes.

“Lately, I’m starting to get you a little,” he said as he took the microwave into Room 201.

“H-hey!”

Then, with a single flowing motion, he ripped the garbage sticker off the device.

“Whoa!”

“If you’re gonna be throwing stuff out, I’ll take it, and you can have this instead.”

He attempted to slap the sticker on the old microwave in Room 201. It

refused to stick. This threw him.

“Huh? Why won’t it go on?”

“Because it is designed so you can only affix it to something once. Otherwise, people could steal your trash.”

“Really? Wait, so I gotta buy another one?”

“You can fill out the back side as well, so if you show that to the garbagemen, they will take it for you. Have you never done this before?”

“No. I’ve never bought anything oversize enough that it needed special handling like this. I’ve seen these stickers before, but I have no idea where you buy them. Can I get them at the convenience store or something?”

“Ah, I see. Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

“...Suzuno?”

Suzuno apparently found this hilarious, but her laughter sounded hollow to him.

“Ha-ha...*aahhhh*... Sorry. I was not expecting any of this, you see...”

“You’re that bent out of shape over your promotion?”

“...” Suzuno didn’t answer. But the expression on her face was easy to read.

“Not that I’m in any position to talk, but you really need to get some rest. Your face looks terrible,” Maou said.

“...Over here...”

“Hmm?”

“Would it be all right if I slept in this room?”

“What?!”

She must have been referring to Room 201. She must have, but the request just made no sense.

“I don’t need to remind you that I don’t have a guest futon...”

“I know. But I want to sleep over here.”

.....Uhhhh.....uhh, all right. Whatever.”

Stricken by a terrible premonition of things to come, Maou grabbed his old microwave and the garbage sticker, attempting to beat a hasty retreat. He was stopped by Suzuno grabbing the back of his shirt.

“I, um,” he stammered. “I’ll leave the key out for you today—”

“You do not leave work until later, yes? I will stay awake until then.”

When he fearfully turned his head around, Maou’s eyes met with Suzuno’s. They were almost pleading with him. He had seen this once, before the battle against heaven—right on the outside corridor here, on a cold winter night.

“I am...a little tired,” she said softly.

“...”

In a weird way, Maou was glad this came after Libicocco had left for work, and while Acieth was being tended to at Shiba’s house. He sighed as he ruthlessly removed Suzuno’s fingers from his shirt.

Then:

“*Gah?!*”

He accidentally, and very lightly, hit Suzuno on the crown of her head with the microwave he was still carrying.

“Wh-what was that for?!” she protested.

Maou, a tad fatigued himself, snorted. “It wasn’t for anything, duh. It couldn’t have hurt that much.”

“Go ahead... Hit me when I’m down...!”

“If you’re ‘down,’ then say so. If you want time off, just file for some.”

“*File* for some?!”

“Remember what our relationship is, *Great Demon General Crestia Bell?*”

“Will you cease that?!”

“Just in case you have the wrong idea, the Devil King’s Army doesn’t work on snide little suggestions. In this office, communication is key. Am I right?”

“...Oof.”

“Or, what, did this relationship grow to the point where I’m expected to pick up on little hints from you?”

“Sh-shut up!”

It was a rather roundabout metaphor for Maou to use, but judging how Suzuno was bright red and about to tear up, he got his point across well.

“You’re the one who should shut up,” he said.

“Wh-where are you going?!”

Maou had intended to leave with that curt observation, but Suzuno’s half-screamed voice clung to him. Peeved, he looked down at what he was carrying.

“I’ll come back once I drop this off, okay? You’re way too old to be acting like an abandoned puppy. Also, that microwave’s mine now, all right? No takebacks.”

Maou eyed the clock for just a moment and left his room.

“...”

Suzuno was in a daze, but not five minutes after he’d left, she heard a large truck stop in front of the building. Then, five minutes later, Maou was back. Seeing that Suzuno was just as frozen up as ten minutes ago, he sat down on the floor, holding up his head with an elbow on his knee.

“So? What kind of pointless crap’s runnin’ through your head now?”



Chiho hated how weak-willed she was.

Because here she was, in front of Villa Rosa Sasazuka on a Saturday morning.

Nothing seemed unusual from the outside. The windows on Rooms 201 and 202 were shut, preventing her from seeing inside.

“Are Maou and Libicocco at work? ...Ah!”

Peering into the front yard, she saw that the usual bicycle she’d expected to be there was gone. Maou, at least, must have a shift—and if he was working, that meant nothing had gone seriously wrong. Just because her Yesod fragment

glowed a little, that apparently wasn't enough reason to come hurrying over here. She had also visited to address the anguish she kept experiencing every night, worrying too much about everything, but that was impossible if nobody was home.

Just when she was about to turn around and head back—

“Huh?”

—Chiho stopped after noticing something small in the yard. It was on the other side of the entrance to the property, seated on the ground against the wall of Room 103: a boy staring at the sky and looking bored.

“Erone?”

“...Oh, Chiho! Good morning.”

Upon noticing her, he patted the dust off himself and ran up to her.

“Everyone upstairs is at work...and everyone else is over there.”

“Over there?”

Erone was pointing at Shiba's house next door.

“Nord is at Ms. Shiba's residence?”

She didn't know what business he had there, but she wasn't *that* aware of what he did in his life. Maybe it was plausible enough...

“You're here to wish Acieth well, too, aren't you?”

“Huh?”

The words *wish Acieth well* made Chiho's face tense up.

“What happened to Acieth?!”

“Oh, you didn't know? She's been sick the past two or three days.”

“I'm sorry, I had no idea... I haven't talked with Maou too much lately.”

“I know. You have ‘college prep’ to deal with, right? Acieth said so, too. She said we can't get in your way.”

“B-but if she's sick, I wanna at least see how she's doing! Is she all right?”

“I dunno, but Amane said I shouldn’t come near her too much. That’s why I’m just watching stuff around here today by myself.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that. Maybe she has the flu? Kind of late in the season for it, but... Or maybe some kind of bacteria in her gut?”

If they wanted Erone to keep his distance, it must be something contagious.

“Amane said she doesn’t know what it is, but... ‘Bacteria in her gut’ is a stomach thing, right? Maybe it’s that.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah,” Erone said, never one to show much emotion. “That, and she’s eating two hundred rice balls every day.”

“I don’t think I heard that right,” Chiho replied, not skipping a beat.

“Yes, you did. Two hundred.”

“Well, if she’s eating that many, no wonder she’s got tummy issues!”

“No, Chiho. She started eating two hundred rice balls after she got sick.”

“Wait, she didn’t get sick because of all the rice balls?!”

“I don’t think even Acieth could stuff that many in her stomach, normally...”

“Uhhhh, I’m sorry, I’m really confused here!”

Acieth’s world-class eating skills were common knowledge by now, but two hundred rice balls a day was beyond any “world” Chiho was aware of. Besides, putting together what she heard from many different people, even on a good day, she concluded that Acieth’s stomach could handle, at maximum, a bit over forty regular McDonald hamburgers in one go. If they were talking the kind of rice ball sizes they sold at convenience stores, two hundred of them would weigh well over forty pounds.

Forty pounds of pure carbohydrates...a day? The amount of rice they’d need to pay for was ridiculous, not to mention the electricity required to cook it all. They’d have to start buying it by the pallet if that kept up, and without an industrial rice cooker or two, they’d never keep up the pace.

“And apparently she gets angry if the rice they use is the cheap kind, so—”

“She’s being *that* selfish?!”

“She says it ‘doesn’t work.’ I guess unless it really satisfies her, she lets out this crazy light beam from her face.”

“This is sounding a lot more serious than I thought!”

If Erone was calling it a “crazy light beam,” it must have been pretty grave indeed. Any light generated by a Yesod fragment could easily have the power to physically destroy stuff.

“So what on earth happened to her? My own fragment actually started to glow a bit for some reason, so I came here because I thought something may have happened to Acieth or Alas Ramus. This sounds pretty serious, doesn’t it?”

“...I’m sorry. I don’t know too much about the Yesod fragments. Mikitty said it might be going out of control, but mine’s different from hers, so...”

“Oh, um, sorry...”

Erone, after all, was the boy who’d stopped the subway in Tokyo once after being enveloped in a black, shadowy metal underneath Shinjuku. It probably wasn’t a tasteful question to ask him.

“But it sounds like Acieth started feeling sick right after Alas Ramus went to Ente Isla. I don’t know why that is, but I don’t think it’s unrelated. So...if you have the time, why don’t you go see her? I bet she’ll be happy to see you.”

“Okay. But... Oh! Right! Hey, you mind if I went into Nord’s apartment real quick?”

“Huh? That’s fine, but what do you need?”

Chiho put both fists up in the air. “I’m visiting Acieth when she’s ill. I need *some* kind of a gift, don’t I?”

Leaving Erone for now, Chiho jogged off to a supermarket near Sasazuka Station, barely bothering to look at the price tags as she filled up her shopping basket. The total at the cashier was higher than anything she had paid before, the handles on the plastic bags digging into her finger joints as she lugged them back to the apartment.

“Wow! That’s a lot!”

“Erone! You mind giving me a hand?”

“Okay! I help Nord in the kitchen every day, so anything you need!”

She patted Erone on the head as he marveled at the piled-up ingredients. Then she rolled up her sleeves.

“...Let’s do it!”



“Huh? Suzuno?!”

“What? Chiho?!”

“Oh, you’re an angel from heaven! That’s food, isn’t it?! More provisions?!”

That last line would sound natural from Acieth, but instead it came from Amane, looking a bit thinner after not being out for a few days. Without a moment’s hesitation, she grabbed the pot in Chiho’s hands and whisked it straight to the room Acieth was resting in.

“Acieth! I have a treat from Chiho!”

“You *do*?!”

If anything, Acieth sounded healthier than ever to Chiho. But:

“Oh, come *on*, not in one bite!”

By the time Chiho ran into the room, the large pot filled with enough stew to feed her whole family for dinner and still have leftovers for tomorrow was completely gone, not a drop remaining.

“That was *gooooooooooooooooooooood*!!”

“Well? Think you can hold out a bit?! It’s twenty minutes until the next meal!”

“I think, I do okay!”

“Don’t worry, Amane! I’ve got a lot more where that came from, and I’ll cook some rice, too!”

“What are you, some kind of goddess?!”

Amane wasn’t her usual self. She was shedding tears, even.

“Suzuno is heating up some oden soup in Nord’s apartment! We’re working

on three different flavor patterns, so can I bring them in as we finish them?”

“Got it!”

Both Chiho and Suzuno were wondering why the other one was there, but seeing Acieth’s current state, they could definitely work that out later. Chiho had only a brief glance, but the walls and ceiling of Acieth’s room appeared pockmarked with innumerable holes and damage—it was as if some Mafia gun battle had taken place in there, no doubt the “light from her face” Erone had talked about. If she shattered a window and the neighbors heard it, there would be absolutely no explaining this.

“Mm? Chiho! What are you doing here?!”

There, wearing a frilly apron that matched his tall frame poorly, Nord was carrying a tray with a good loaf’s worth of bread slices, toasted and topped with honey, fruit, ice cream, and so on.

“I heard from Erone! Sorry, but I’m borrowing your kitchen for a bit!”

“All right! Thank you!”

Dark circles weighed down the appearance of his eyes. Cooking for Acieth for several days in a row must have taken him to the brink.

“Okay, coming up, we have oden, curry, pork miso soup, and rounds two and three of the stew on deck!”

““Thanks!”” screamed the two grown-ups as Chiho followed after Suzuno, rushing over to prepare more food. Amane and Nord, their voices almost breaking, told Chiho everything she needed to know about the trouble they faced, something she didn’t expect at all. With her getting involved and opening up Room 202 as well, there were now three kitchens in full operation, and by the afternoon, Acieth’s room was finally full of enough food to keep her sated for the day.

“You truly saved us, Chiho. Acieth seems to have quite the appetite today...”

“She went through over a hundred rice balls this morning alone. She’s got to be getting sick of them.”

“Sick...? Ah, yeah, you might be right.”

For a moment, this sounded incredibly extravagant to Chiho. Then she realized that eating a hundred of just about *anything* would likely get boring fast.

In the living room of Room 202, Suzuno was slumped over her tea table, completely spent. Chiho was sitting cross-legged, chuckling to herself. For now—whether she was full, or some other condition within her was satisfied—Acieth was taking a nap. In the meantime, rice was cooking away at the kitchens in Room 101, Room 202, and Shiba's house, and it was time for a break before prepping Acieth's dinner.

"Erone told me she ate two hundred rice balls a day," Chiho said.

"The quantity changes depending on her condition, apparently. The worse she feels, the more gluttonous she becomes. We were solely focused on things we could produce a great deal of. Picking up oden soup ingredients from the supermarket never occurred to us. We can buy a lot of that for cheap, so we will have to rely on that and hold out for now."

"Yeah, in terms of having to take her time eating, it's a good idea. Hopefully, she can build up more of an immunity or whatever."

"Normally, if you ate *that* much, your body would physically fall apart."

"It's strange, isn't it? You know, a lot of people who can eat a whole lot are actually really small and skinny. Like, their stomachs are located lower down than most people's, and that lets them pack in a lot more, I heard."

"It hardly matters where her stomach is. How could hers possibly hold ten or so pounds of rice at once? Ugh..."

"You know, though, I haven't been running around a kitchen cooking like that since I quit my job. It was hard but kinda fun, too."

"Ha-ha-ha... Ugghhh." Suzuno turned her face away a little. "I am sorry. Relying on you like this, when you can least afford it... Are you safe not having to visit that 'test-prep center' today?"

"I have a class tonight, but I'll be free until evening. We were so busy that I never got a chance to tell you, but earlier..."

Chiho explained that she stopped by today because her Yesod fragment was acting like it never had before, raising concern that something had happened to Acieth or Maou.

“And what you found,” observed Suzuno, “was sheer gluttony.”

“I tried bringing my ring up to Acieth’s forehead while she was sleeping, but nothing special happened at all. Maybe it’s unrelated.”

“I doubt it is wholly unrelated. Perhaps they are meant to react together in some different way.”

“Some different way?”

“All these Yesod fragments manifest themselves in different ways, you see. If you try to force the reaction, it could only drive them further beyond our control.”

This gave Chiho pause. Maybe that little experiment earlier was carelessly unwise of her.

“Well,” continued Suzuno, “we will have to continue waiting and seeing. On the other hand, just because Acieth is facing issues may not mean Alas Ramus is in the same boat... Besides, thanks to a few recent events, I have a much better grasp of the timing of our upcoming Crusade.”

“Oh, you do?!”

“Yes. In the meantime, we will have to wait either for Acieth to improve, or for more news to come from Emilia or Alciel. We can consider our next steps at that point. But until then...”

“Um, Suzuno...?”

“Mm?”

“When did you come back here? I don’t think it’s been that long since you got appointed Archbishop... Are you supposed to be on the Northern Island right now?”

“No, the Western at the moment. I am back at headquarters, in the midst of a purification ritual for my upcoming ordination.”

“In the midst of it...?”

That made Suzuno’s presence in front of her right now a mystery.

“I have...absconded from it. It is an annoying rite.”

“You can do that?!”

Piecing together everything Suzuno had said during her last visit, the appointment of a new Church Archbishop was a historical event, on the level of inaugurating a U.S. president or choosing a pope in the Vatican. That was when she had heard that the ordination ceremony itself only comes after a long itinerary of observances and rituals. Despite that, the person behind all this epoch-making Ente Isla news was currently crafting rice balls in her landlord’s kitchen. That *couldn’t* be right.

Suzuno’s hangdog face stretched out across the table.

“It is fine. Nobody is looking anyway.”

“No?”

Suzuno sounded like she was making excuses for running a red light at two in the morning. It flummoxed Chiho.

“This purification rite—it actually has a far more florid name than that, but nevertheless—has been assigned to me for ten days, this being a special case. Anyone being ordained must report to an area within our headquarters known as the Divine Grotto, where they must meditate and pray for a set period of time. That is where I theoretically am at the moment.”

In actuality, of course, she was in a sixty-year-old apartment building cooking rice balls.

“Well, if you think that’s okay, then fine by me, but...”

“Nobody will be checking up on me, trust me. That is how these matters work. Thus, I am free to do what I want here for another week.”

That was Suzuno’s claim, and she seemed reasonably sure of herself. It also certainly served Chiho’s needs, as well as those of the Devil King’s Army. But it still seemed very strange for Suzuno to openly flout something like that...and Suzuno must’ve picked up on Chiho’s apprehension.

“Why would I ever want to hole up in a dark, gloomy chamber and keep Alas Ramus so terribly depressed as I prayed?”

She seemed to be using the meanest words possible to describe the proposition.

“Earlier, Chiho, I must admit, I treated you very poorly. But I truly *was* unnerved by the announcement, and I truly had no idea what to do about it.”

“Oh, um, that’s okay...”

“But now... How to put it? It all just seems so ridiculous.”

“Being an Archbishop?”

“...Many things. Normally, this purification rite would take a month.”

“Wow! A whole month?”

That sounded long to Chiho, but considering the holiness of the position and the influence it had on the world, it didn’t seem *that* far out of line.

“But what do you think Archbishop Mauro told me? The man tasked with supervising our department of holy scriptures and teachings? He said we could shorten it to ten days, ‘given the circumstances.’”

“Oh? He can just do that?”

“No. Not normally. But apparently, given the urgent need to hurry along the Crusade, God will allow it this time. Convenient, is it not?”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

“And this ‘Divine Grotto,’ let me tell you, is another fine piece of work.”

The derision echoing in her voice certainly didn’t sound like something from the mouth of a future Archbishop. But it also didn’t sound like Suzuno, who knew the identity of her religion’s God and declared that her true faith lay within her own heart.

“There is a large rock there, which you are meant to sit on and pray, or... exorcise yourself, you could say. It forms a natural sort of surface to sit on and contemplate the mysteries of nature or whatnot...but there is actually a cushion built into it.”

“Huh? A cushion?”

“To be exact, a ‘cushion’ of scraps of cloth, plant leaves, and whatever sand and earth there is around the rock. The Archbishops of all the past generations must have built it up over the years, to preserve their legs and make the thirty-day prayer session less of an ordeal. This grotto is atop a rising cliff, but it is dry and airy up there, well exposed to sunlight. It is actually rather soft to sit on, like straw.”

“Wouldn’t people get mad if they knew about that?”

“Only those at the very peak of the ecclesial bureaucracy would ever have a chance to sit there. Who would question something that generations of Archbishops have participated in? It is akin to a secret cubbyhole in a school classroom, something passed down from era to era.”

That seemed like a rather common thing to compare it to.

“And listen to this. Normally, I am meant to survive the rite with only a small supply of beans, vegetables, and water, supplied by the last Archbishop to be ordained...but let me tell you, my provisions were several dozen times fancier than what I expected.”

“Fancier?”

Suzuno questioned why her stipend differed so much from the standards she had read. Mauro, who was ordained after Cervantes despite being much older, casually explained that since her ceremony would come immediately after this rite (and the Crusade right after that), there was no need for excessive self-restraint that could affect her health at a delicate time.

“And hearing that... Well, I think it broke something within me. My very faith in the Church.”

Here was a Church eager to bend its rules whenever that made things easier. Right now, of course, a successful Crusade was their primary concern—especially considering what had triggered that Crusade in the first place, the “holy dream” all the current Archbishops somehow had at the same time. Clearly it was divinity at work, and thus, it really should behoove them to consider God’s intentions as they went ahead with the ordination procedure.

Instead, in the name of the golden banner of a Crusade, all “holiness” was being cast aside—and the Archbishops, supposedly moved to tears by the divine vision they’d had, saw no concern about that whatsoever.

“It is all one giant contradiction,” Suzuno uttered bitterly. “These people, driven by God to take action, are ignoring the very things that must be done to support this God. How could this nonsense ever be tolerated? They literally saw God, in the flesh—but my ordination, and my prayers, are all being cut down two-thirds because time is so short. How can they be so content with that?”

“...I don’t know... I’m afraid I might offend you if I say this, Suzuno, but...” Chiho began.

“Go ahead.”

“I think all the Archbishops...want God to praise them, don’t they?”

“...”

“They saw, and experienced, all of that...so I think they want to do whatever it takes to answer the call. But those were just dreams. It’s not like they caught God on a surveillance camera. If they want the Archbishops to believe, they’ll need to keep using the current Church system as it exists. So...”

“Yes?”

“I think the Archbishops actually believe in God more than they ever did before, actually. And then—”

“Right. You are absolutely right.”

“Oh?”

“I came to the same conclusion.”

“Huh?”

Suzuno sat up and grasped Chiho’s hand in both her own.

“And that is exactly why I ducked out of it.”

“What?”

“Their faith has likely regressed back to its original, simplest, purest level. So they decided to try to bend the long-established rules behind all the showy

ceremonies, things decided by God-knows-who long ago, the way a politician may try to massage the law to his advantage. As they see it, there are more important matters at hand, no doubt. They want to exercise the full brunt of their powers, for the sake of their true ‘God.’ ...Chiho?”

“Y-yes?”

“What do you think this is called?”

“Um... What do I think it’s called?”

“Yes. The Archbishops exercising their full powers for the sake of God.”

“Oh? Umm...”

“Personally, I would call it love.”

“Looove?” Chiho repeated in surprise. That had come out of nowhere.

“Love does not seek compensation,” Suzuno said. “Faith is the same way. Sometimes it is a bond that helps you control yourself, but at the same time, if you want a fulfilled heart and a peaceful society, then love is absolutely necessary.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right...but what’s wrong, Suzuno? Are you tired out?”

Chiho didn’t think Suzuno had ever talked to her so fervently about religion before. She was born into the Sasaki family, which was apparently Buddhist, but there was no altar or other accessories around the house. The topic was rarely one she considered in her daily routine. And that was Japan in a nutshell—people giving each other Christmas presents, going to the local Buddhist temple on New Year’s Eve, and switching to the Shinto shrine on January 1 proper without a second thought. When a distant relative passed away, Chiho offered incense to a shrine during the funeral; when her cousin in Nagano got married, she took dozens of photos of the chapel.

Right now, Suzuno didn’t seem like a “cleric,” or a practitioner; someone who knocked on your door and started going on about God or the Buddha or holy scriptures unprompted. She seemed more like an evangelist, and that made Chiho step back a little. Suzuno, perhaps picking up on this, looked aside, a bit ashamed of getting overly excited, as she let go of Chiho’s hand and sat straight

up.

“M-my apologies. This was just such a revolutionary new way of thinking for me that I, erm, became a bit excited.”

“No, it’s fine, but... Really, what happened to you, Suzuno? You sounded like you didn’t want to be an Archbishop earlier, but are your feelings, you know, changing about that...?”

“They have. Yes, I suppose they have.”

Suzuno, kneeling properly on the floor, stretched her body and looked at Chiho, her chilly eyes betraying none of the passion from before.

“You see...I envy you, Chiho.”

“You do?”

Yet another curveball. Suzuno was showing different colors to Chiho with each passing minute.

“You have the kind of convictions that took me over twenty years and the total upheaval of my world to finally gain a vague grasp of.”

“Uhhh...”

“The four Archbishops, through this Crusade, inadvertently came to acquire a love-based devotion from it—a devotion that sprang from the joy of having God look toward them. That was all it took to gain this desire to do anything for your chosen target, without any expectation of being repaid. This feeling.”

Chiho mentally prepared herself for more of the same from before. Then she noticed something odd. When Suzuno said “this feeling” just now, she did something strange with her body.

“After the Crusade succeeds, the Archbishops will all undoubtedly acquire untold amounts of earthly wealth. God, on the other hand, will give them nothing. Of course not...because we are going to slay that god. The ‘God’ of our scripture does not exist in Ente Isla, but I am sure they will silently accept this lack of repayment, not a single moment of enmity in their minds. They will remain dedicated to their faith, all because of that single dream they were given...”

“Suzuno?”

Suzuno had been keeping her right hand at her heart the whole time. Her cheeks were flushed. She was older than Chiho, but there was innocence in her expression—full of a small, flickering, but still unmistakable happiness.

The expression reminded Chiho of something. It was nothing Suzuno had showed before. No, Chiho herself had. She knew how it felt.

“So I realized. I... I believe that I love...Sadao Maou. Satan, the Devil King.”

“...”

As much as she understood the words, Chiho found her heart strangely calm about them.

“I felt the responsibilities of my appointment crush me. I was disillusioned by the Archbishops trivializing the ceremonies. But I said nothing to anyone as I returned to Room 202. Then I ran into the Devil King, looking about ready to die. And I thought to myself: As painful as this is for me, why have I never considered any other path besides the one I am on? You may laugh if you want. But even as I was thrown for a loop by the fleetingness of the Church’s faith, here was this man, exhausted from making rice balls for Acieth, hoping to retire early for tomorrow’s workday, but too concerned that Alas Ramus may be in trouble as well—but, also, too weary to think straight, head hanging down as he sat on the floor. Seeing him convinced me. *This* was why I came back. Because I wanted to see him in these beautifully normal times.”

She spoke with a quick pace, the exaltation spreading across her face.

“The Church is a house that protects its faith based upon love. To me, the Church—my home—is in this apartment building. It is the Devil King I love, and life with everybody here... So...from the bottom of my heart...I envy you, Chiho.”



“Suzuno...”

A tear welled up in the joyous Suzuno’s eye. “Simply because you love him, you are able to *be* with the one you love...and I envy that.”

“...Can I ask you a question?”

“...Please.”

Chiho, her voice sounding a bit tense, felt no jealousy or malice toward Suzuno. In fact, she half knew the answer already.

“Didn’t Maou run away from you? Didn’t he make a face, come up with some diversion, bring up his upcoming shift, and run off on you?”

“...!”

That seemed to surprise Suzuno. She opened up her eyes.

“...How did you know that? That...I told the Devil King about what is in my heart?”

“Oh, I can tell. I’m your friend, Suzuno.”

Chiho smiled, looking a tad distressed. Now it was her taking up Suzuno’s hand.

“Suzuno, you’re not the type of person who can hide what you really love, are you?”

“...You think not?”

“Whenever you have some udon or whatever else you like, you always have a big smile on your face. When you see a pretty hairpin, or Alas Ramus is being cute, or you see something else you love, you’re grinning from ear to ear. And then you always fervently go on about what makes them so great, don’t you? From multiple angles.”

“You... You may be right...”

“It’s always the same thing. That’s why I thought you probably told him.”

Suzuno looked surprised at Chiho’s intuition but quickly averted her eyes. Her pace accelerated as she attempted to make an excuse.

“At—at first, I just discussed everything I knew about the other side. I wanted to—to share what I knew, is all.”

“Right, and then you built up some momentum. And honestly, I do the same thing. Like, you probably heard me, didn’t you, Suzuno?”

“Oh, er, um, my apologies. The way things were then, you know, I had some more...malice in mind, you could say, um...”

“But now, even though you know I love Maou, you just can’t hold it in anymore, can you?”

“Mm...”

That much meanness, Chiho figured, would be forgiven. She pat the shoulder of the silenced Suzuno and shook her head.

“It really brings me back, you know? Me treating you as my sworn enemy, trying my hardest to keep you from taking him... Learning all about cooking from my mother... But back then, to me, you were nothing but this anonymous grown-up woman. Now, for the first time...you’re my rival in love.”

“Chiho... I don’t want you to have the wrong idea. I have no interest at all in being betrothed to the Devil King, or spending my life with him forever. But I love him, so if I can remain someone precious to him, I would hope for nothing else... To tell you the truth, I planned to take this opportunity to move out of Room 202.”

“Huh?”

After her ordination, Suzuno intended to serve as both Archbishop and Great Demon General, working as a kind of buffer between the Western Island (not likely to accept demons moving in anytime soon) and the other continents. If so, however, she wouldn’t be able to while away the hours in Room 202 like a retired grandmother, looking through kimono catalogs and playing with Alas Ramus whenever she visited. So she was trying to get rid of her furniture and appliances in a hurry, and that was when Maou had caught her.

“Oh, so that’s why...”

“Hmm?”

“When I was cooking in Room 101, I noticed this microwave in the corner that wasn’t plugged into anything. I thought I had seen it somewhere before, but that was Maou’s, wasn’t it?”

“Huh?! So he didn’t throw that away after all?!”

“Oh, I think he probably intended to return it once you calmed down a little, Suzuno. But he didn’t know what was troubling you then, so I bet he just had Nord keep it until he could go fetch it again.”

“...”

Chiho didn’t think her theory was far off the mark. Suzuno was nodding to herself now, convinced. Seeing that, Chiho looked at the spot formerly occupied by the microwave currently in Room 201.

“And along those lines, you know, I’m just so incredibly jealous of you. You know, Suzuno?”

“Huh?”

“Maou’s so casual with you, you’re way better at any kind of domestic chore than I am, and just imagining you two talking about whatever little thing just because you get to live next to each other... And, you know, whenever Maou acts along the lines of, like, ‘just leave the Church and the Western Island to Suzuno, she’ll work it out,’ it just amazes me; the equal footing you have with him. I mean, I know he values me, but we’re still not really equals at all. I’m still just a kid.”

“No you’re not! Chiho, you...!”

“I’m a child. Unlike you, no matter how much I love Maou, I’m not an adult on equal footing with him. I’m just ‘Chi,’ you know? It took your help, and Libicocco’s and Lidem’s, before I could finally be called ‘Chiho.’ Remember how much of a kid Maou treated me as when I went out for the *zirga*?”

She ran an idle hand against the tatami floor.

“I’m grasping for something that doesn’t exist. But if you feel the same way, Suzuno, I figure—you know—asking for this much wouldn’t be frowned upon. I’m in the same boat you are.”

Then she turned toward Room 201.

“What do I want? I want to keep joining you all for meals forever. Forever and ever.”

“Chiho...”

“And yes, I’d like to marry him, and no, I don’t want you to take him, and so on and so forth. But until yesterday, I was truly worried that we’d never be able to eat together like before again. You’re going to be an Archbishop, Maou and his friends are going to Ente Isla to do all their demon duties, Alas Ramus and Acieth and Erone are gonna live in heaven with their family...Yusa, and her parents, will go back to their home village... And then I’d just be stuck reminiscing with you, like ‘Oh, we all went through a lot in Japan, but it was sure nice, wasn’t it?’ And then our magic will fade away, and we won’t be able to open any Gates...and I’ll be all grown up in Japan. But...”

The only possible picture of the future. The one she spent evenings mulling over, face buried in her pillow. But now Suzuno was driving a wedge into that sad scenario.

Or maybe Emi was the first to do that. The day before she went to Ente Isla, Emi said she felt safe taking the journey because Maou was so dedicated to his daily routine on Earth. And now, here in Room 201, Suzuno had discovered her own feelings for Maou as he struggled with his life—and revealed them to him. Nobody was rich among them; it was a constant riot, but there was something warm about that dining table. It was precious, deep within their hearts; more than Suzuno or Emi or even Chiho realized.

So wasn’t it all right for Chiho to express herself a little more, if she wanted to preserve it?

“Hey, Suzuno, what’s it like in Ente Isla right now?”

“Um? What?”

Suzuno helplessly blinked at the sudden change of subject.

“What were you going to report back to Maou about first? Like, about how the Crusade schedule’s changed because of your ordination, or about how Urushihara and Laila took Kinanna over and that changed a whole bunch of

things?”

“Er... Yes. Farfarello in the North and Emeraldalda in the West provide me with information from reliable sources, so I think they can be trusted. Emeraldalda *did* chew me out for never telling her my birthplace, but...”

Chiho, not knowing much about the ordination process, wasn't sure why that was an issue. But between her Yesod fragment glowing last night and running into Erone earlier, her mind had been full of vague thoughts, and now she wanted to act on them.

“Suzuno?”

“Y-yes?”

“You being my love rival makes me want to steel myself and say ‘Here we go!’ on the one hand...but on the other, I think I'm gonna get to like you even more, which I'm glad for.”

“Um...yes... Using the term *love rival* to describe it strikes me as very, ah, embarrassing, but...”

“But on the other hand, there's also something I'm angry about.”

“Oh! W-well, of course, I—”

“With Maou, I mean.”

“Huh? Him?”

Even after everything she'd said before, Suzuno was prepared to have Chiho lay it on her. Instead, she got a very thoughtful look from the girl, much to Suzuno's surprise.

“I'm angry because I've been letting his reply to me slide for so long, pestering him and seeing him get all confused about it, and now he's taking the exact same approach with you as well.”

“W-well, my own confession came so suddenly, and I did not suggest we become a couple or anything of the sort, so there was little in the way of a reply he could give...”

“But if there's no chance at all, I want him to say that. We're talking a demon

and a human being. I'm not going to expect our feelings for love to be exactly the same, so if he could just tell me, I could accept it and wait, or give up, or whatever I need to do. But he won't even do that. He acts like he's got the human race all figured out, and yet he's pulling all this. In fact, I bet right now he's complaining with Kawacchi about how he's dreading coming home tonight because he was all vague with you and didn't say what he meant!"

Chiho was taking advantage of Maou's absence to draw a pretty vivid picture, and why it made her angry. And she wasn't done yet:

"So I've decided on something. And if I want to take action on it, Suzuno, I need you to lend me some of your time after this. We have a few things we need to discuss."

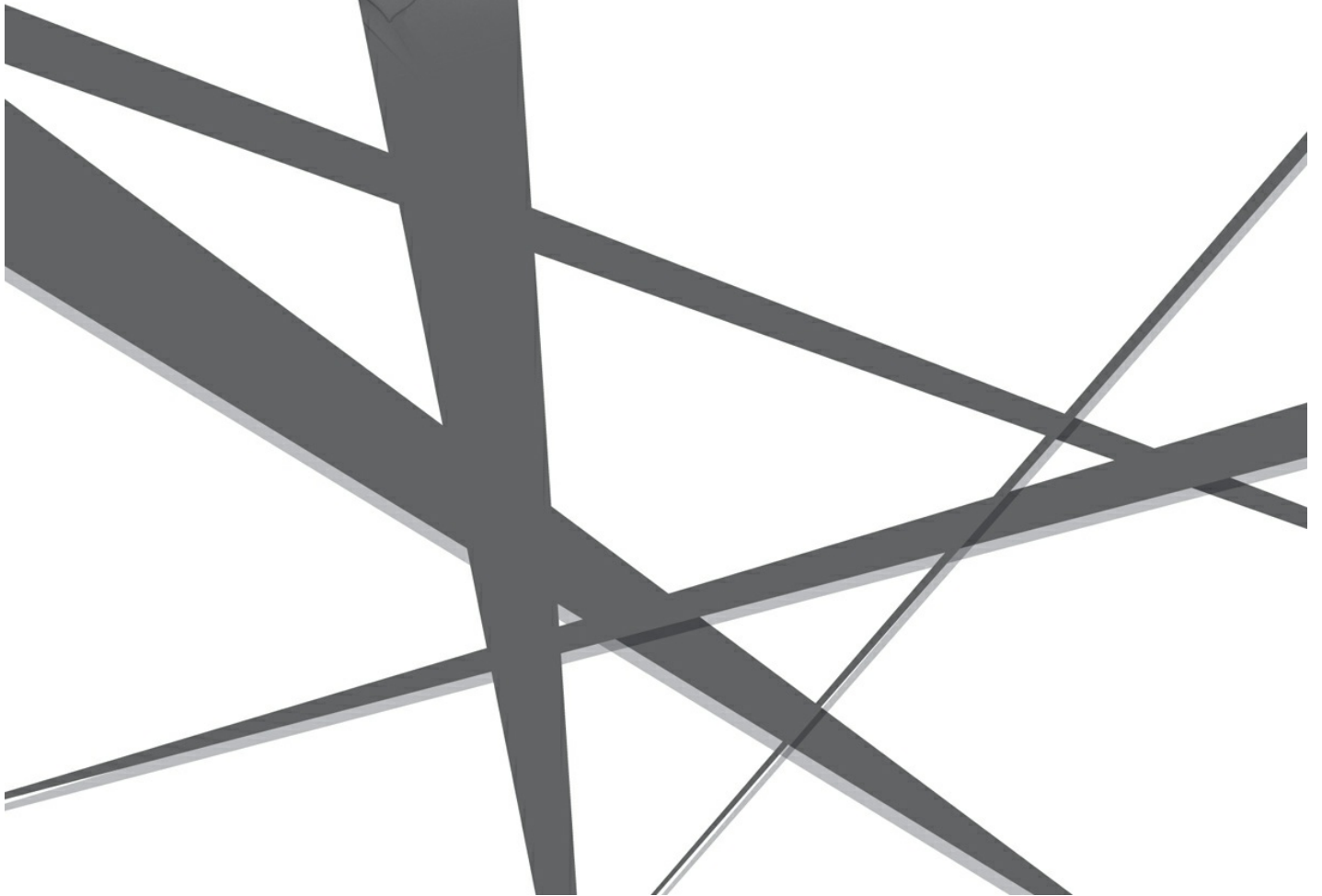
"Er, all right."

"And once we work it all out..."

To Suzuno, who had just admitted her love for Maou to Chiho, her suggestion was enough to make her keel over.

"...Would you mind joining me at MgRonald?"

**THE
TEENAGER
BEGINS
MOVING
THE
WORLD**



THE TEENAGER BEGINS MOVING THE WORLD

“What...in the *hell* are those people thinking?!”

Maou was lying low behind the MgCafé counter, the helmet for his delivery runs still in his hands. He’d just gotten back from a run to the far edge of their coverage zone, only to find a couple of familiar figures waiting at the registers downstairs. He’d never mistake anyone else for Suzuno, and the sight of her was already enough to make his heart leap out from his throat—but when he saw Chiho next to her, it threw him into a state of complete befuddlement.

“Oh man, did she tell Chiho about what she did?!”

Judging by her personality, it wasn’t an unthinkable thing for Suzuno to do.

“Damn it... Seriously, what is *with* her?”

She’d been acting clearly out of sorts in the morning, so he’d decided it was time to sit himself down and have a serious talk with her. She’d begun by talking about her disillusionment with the Church and its Archbishops, as well as the latest news from Ente Isla—all in that same meandering sort of style she’d exhibited earlier. But halfway through, she’d fallen silent more and more often, and the next thing he knew...

“Ngh...”

The way he’d acted afterward seemed so pathetic to him now. When a person (or Devil King) ran into a situation they truly never saw coming, it became impossible to logically reason through it. Her shining eyes, slightly flushed cheeks, and the words coming out of her well-shaped lips had taken Maou—who had just been trying to “debug” her a little—and shocked him to the core, like a sniper had just scored a shot on his temple. The next thing he knew, he was on his bike and headed for MgRonald. He couldn’t remember anything about what he’d done just before he’d taken off.

“Chiho *did* say her test-prep center was nearby... They probably just ran into each other outside, so now they decided to have lunch or something.”

“Oh? Nobody’s here. Excuse me?”

The MgRonald instincts implanted into his DNA put an immediate end to his one-man game of hide-and-seek, and he bolted upright, right into the crosshairs.

“Ah, sorry! Welcome...!”

“Good afternoon!”

He was greeted by Chiho, hands held behind her back.

“Oh... Um, hi, Chi.”

“Hello!”

She was smiling at him.

“Why do you have your jacket and helmet up here?” she asked, still smiling.

“Umm, I needed to handle something fast...”

Chiho was a fellow MgRonald Barista. The lie he’d fashioned for her was desperately laughable.

“Oh, you did?”

The smile went nowhere.

“Uh, so, what’ll you have?”

Beaten down, Maou broke every rule of the customer service manual as he struggled to serve her. He still had all his delivery stuff with him, and he hadn’t even washed his hands. Chiho must have known that, but she made no comment about it.

Now he was sure of it. Chiho *knew*.

“Um, so, so today’s coffee blend uses, ah, C-C-Colombian beans...”

His mouth stalled on him. It was so meaningless. He was acting like an unfaithful man, scared to death that his lady had just discovered his cheating ways.

“Maou?”

“Yes!”

“Amane’s actually going to be joining us later.”

“.....Huh?”

He blinked, startled. It was yet another unexpected twist.

“Nord is looking after Acieth. I wanted to ask a favor from Ms. Iwaki, but I don’t think Suzuno and I have enough negotiating power. So we’ll have Amane along, and perhaps Ms. Shiba as well.”

“The landlord? What’re you gonna do?”

This was already sounding scary—but Maou, unsure where this was going, could do little apart from ask the question.

“Well, this is still in the planning stages, and there’s no guarantee it’ll work... but, you know, if you saw Ms. Shiba here without any warning, you’d be scared out of your wits, right? So I wanted to warn you in advance.”

“Y-yeah, you’re probably right, but—”

“Oh, and I’ll have hot blend coffee while I’m up here. Milk and sugar, please.”

“O-okay. Um, hang on a sec, okay?”

Maybe Maou *was* jumping to conclusions. But if he was going to actually make something, he couldn’t keep his helmet and jacket around. Placing them under the counter for the time being, he washed his hands at the sink on the far edge.

“Oh, and Maou?”

“Mm?”

His hands dry now, Maou took the hot cup from the machine when:

“You really need to give Suzuno a reply soon.”

“...! ...Dah! Whoa...!!”

He then juggled the suddenly slippery cup a few times in the air, catching hold of it mere inches from the floor. Ever so gingerly, he looked up, only to find

Chiho now staring coldly at him.

“D-did you hear about it?”

“Yes. All of it.”

“Ummm...”

“And based on what I heard...”

Maou stayed where he was, crouched down with a cup in his hand, unable to stand back up.

“...it sounds like there’s a possibility with Suzuno as well.”

“Huh? Ah, um, no, a ‘possibility,’ I mean...”

“*That’s* what ‘not giving a reply’ sounds like. That’s why I’ve been waiting all this time.”

“Oh...”

“You can accept her, refuse her, throw her out on the street... You can do any of that. But if you don’t, doesn’t that mean you’re at a loss over something?”

The cup in Maou’s hand was now back to room temperature. He hadn’t even touched the cash register yet. Underneath Chiho’s gaze, he was frozen like a statue.

“I understand. I know now’s not the time for this. We’re busy here *and* Over There, and we have a lot to worry about. I understand all that. But still...”

Chiho’s voice was strong, and resolved, as it rained down upon him.

“The one thing you mustn’t do is run away and leave everything unsettled.”

“I—I’m not running away...”

“You’re not? Because I feel like you’re about to ride it out and try leaving it all vague again...”

She wasn’t letting up.

“Aren’t you going to be even busier once you win the war against heaven? Like, you’ll have multiple challenges that’ll all take more than a year or two to wrap up. And even before that, the way Suzuno’s putting it, this Crusade’s

making the whole thing a lot harder, isn't it? Once you plunge into *that*, when am I ever going to receive a reply?"

Before now, Chiho, out of consideration for Maou's situation, had refrained from bothering him for a reply. Now, things had changed.

If this kept up, it would all just start flowing away. He wouldn't accept Suzuno's feelings; he wouldn't spurn them; he'd just run away. In other words, he was being a...

"Maou, you're such a wimp!"

It was probably the strongest, most vicious thing Chiho had ever said to him. And it was the pure, unvarnished truth.

If Maou could've taken a firm stance with human women, the way Ashiya and Urushihara could, he would've been able to find an excuse and given them a "no" as gently as possible. They lived in different worlds, different ecosystems; they had nothing at all in common. That wasn't something beyond him, personality-wise. But Maou never did it. Not with Chiho, and not with Suzuno. The warmth of the feelings thrown in his direction flustered him; he turned away, unsure what to do.

"When Suzuno first came to us, I thought of her as a rival. I was told she had the best chance of making something work with you. So it's fine if she has feelings for you. But...there's something I'm never going to give up."

"What's...that...?" Maou asked in a painfully dry voice.

"My place in line."

What did she mean by that?

"I want my reply to come *after* Suzuno's. Do you know what I..."

"..."

"...No, never mind."

Chiho was about to launch into an impassioned argument but stopped after she noticed Maou reflecting on something. Chances were good that Maou, still unable to process Suzuno's confession, was too thrown by Chiho knowing about it that his brain was failing him.

“Amane’s going to be here soon. Can I have my coffee?”

“Ah, s-sorry...”

Not even this dire situation permitted his crewmember’s DNA to hand her a cold cup. Maou took out a new one, filled it with today’s coffee blend, and placed it on the counter with the milk and sugar.

“Talk to you later,” Chiho said, putting exact change down before picking up the cup and turning around. Before she could go:

“Chi, I...!”



“Maou.”

But Chiho’s sharp voice cut him off.

“I think I’m about to decide for myself, too, from here on in.”

“...Huh?”

“I’ve been troubled about this for so long. I thought there was nothing I could do about it. But...now that I know Suzuno’s the same way, I feel a bit relieved.”

“Wh-what are you—?”

“Starting today, I’m not going to worry about what other people think. I’m going to choose for myself and move on. And once it’s over...”

Now, finally, Chiho gave him a sincere smile. But it wasn’t the warm, youthful one from before. It was smoldering, forged with an iron will.

“...you won’t feel obligated to call me ‘Chi’ any longer.”

“...?!”

“I’ll see you later.”

With that riddle of a farewell, Chiho went back downstairs.

Maou stood there for a few moments, dumbfounded, before grabbing his helmet and jacket and following her down, as if driven. But Amane was already down there, joining Chiho and Suzuno as they all discussed something, serious looks on their faces. Then, much to his surprise, they all filed into the staff room.

“What’s up, Maou?” Akiko asked, noticing him in a daze at the base of the stairs. Maou, unable to believe what he was seeing, couldn’t respond.

Eventually, though, he willed himself to go back to work—and somewhere along the line, Chiho, Suzuno, and Amane all excused themselves. Then, in another surprise, Iwaki did the same after the dinner rush. “Sorry, everyone,” he said over the crew’s headsets, “but I got an errand over at the regional office. I’ll be back in about an hour, and I’ll be in contact if you need anything, so Maou, take over for me.”

Maou, hearing this, instinctively knew today’s trio of visitors had something to

do with it. He had casually asked Libicocco about them when he came down, but he sadly was on kitchen duty the whole day, out of sight of both the dining area and the staff room. “Did something happen?” he asked, picking up on Maou’s consternation—and after a moment of thought, Maou decided to be frank with him.

“Honestly, even after all this, I don’t know.”

“Um...”

“But I’ll tell you one thing—I really don’t want to go home today.”

“Huh? Did you do something to rile Crestia Bell’s anger?”

“Whoa! Stop right there! That’s the last name I wanna hear right now!”

“Oh. I’ll try not to say it, then.”

There was not much else Libicocco had to offer.

Then, ever so cruelly, time marched on, all the way to closing—and with Libicocco getting out early at ten PM, Maou began to feel truly alone. Iwaki had returned long ago, but he was so scared of learning what she’d talked about with Chiho that he couldn’t will himself to leave the café counter.

Still, they had to lock things up.

“Maou? Doing okay? Something happen upstairs?”

Maou, hearing his manager’s voice on his headset, resigned himself to his fate and headed down.

“Oh, good, you’re done? Sorry to bother you, but would you mind staying on a little after closing?”

“Huh?”

“We’ll be done down here in just a moment. I need to talk with Ohki and Kawata as well, so can you wait just a little bit in the staff room for me?”

“Okay...”

Looking over at the counter, he could see Akiko and Kawata wrapping up the closing procedure.

“What’s *that* about?”

Gripped by an indescribable dread, Maou handed Iwaki the closing check sheet from upstairs and went to the staff room. She didn’t officially relieve him of duty yet, so he remained in his uniform—a smart move, it turned out, because around ten minutes later, Iwaki, Akiko, and Kawata all filed into the room, each taking a folding chair.

“Now, this may sound kind of weird...”

Iwaki put her hat on the desk and sat down, looking at the calendar on the wall.

“...but I’ve received a request to reserve the whole restaurant for a private event.”

“The whole...?!”

All three of Iwaki’s crewmembers were shocked.

“Is that...*possible*?”

Akiko couldn’t be blamed for asking. This wasn’t a fancy restaurant or hotel. No one in their right mind ever considered renting out an entire fast-food joint for themselves.

“Not...*usually*, no. But we’ve got kind of a special case here. So, apologies this is so sudden, but it’s set for tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow afternoon?!”

This was beyond sudden. The three of them looked at the calendar, then back at Iwaki several times, trying to figure out what lay behind this “special case.”

“Does this have to do with Chi visiting earlier?” Maou ventured.

Iwaki nodded, looking a bit embarrassed. “Yes... It’s kind of an odd thing, actually, but Sasaki introduced me to a Ms. Ohguro, you see, and apparently she wanted to reserve the entire restaurant. I’m not sure exactly how they know each other...but have you heard of this company?”

She took out a business card. Seeing what was on it, Maou had to resist laughter:

SHIBA INDUSTRIES, LTD.

AMANE OHGURO

DISTRICT MANAGER

This company, and Amane's wholly unexplained position in it, were a total mystery to Maou. But he knew that his landlord had her fingers in a lot of different businesses. If it was a family company, it wouldn't be odd if her niece had some kind of corporate title within it.

"SHIBA Industries, you see, is the principal stockholder of McGonald Japan."

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?!"

He could no longer contain himself.

"...It's that big of a surprise to you, Maou? It's in the company handbook. Didn't you see it when you studied for the managerial exam?"

He'd definitely *glanced* at the list of chief stockholders while prepping for that test—and yes, come to think of it, "SHIBA Industries" was definitely on that list. But never in a million years would Maou link Miki Shiba to that name.

"Either way," Iwaki continued, leaving the jumbled Maou in the dust, "an outfit like that has voting rights at the stockholder meetings, so we can't really snub them as a company, you know?"

"R-right..."

"So here's the important part," she continued, her voice growing tense. "The three of you were requested to staff this event."

Maou could say nothing in reply. There was no way this was a simple business-to-business request. Chiho and Amane were planning something. Something outrageous. Did Chiho know about this "SHIBA Industries" thing? And if one business card from them had the power to engineer all of this, then Miki Shiba herself must have been involved—not just Amane, the young lady who always dressed like she'd just got out of bed.

"Um... Why would they do that? We don't have anything to do with this company."

Kawata looked just as confused as Maou.

“I don’t know,” added a much more optimistic Akiko, “but maybe we could put this on our résumés, huh?”

“Well, you can turn them down, of course. I’m afraid I can’t give you a bonus or anything for manning this event. But what do you think?”

““ ... ””

Maou’s coworkers looked at each other, mixed emotions on their faces.

“It’s just the three of us?” he asked. “Working that event, I mean?”

“No,” replied Iwaki, slightly distressed. “You’ll have Yusa and Libicocco...and also, Sasaki is returning for one day only.”

“Wha? Chi is?!”

“Did Chi get requested by name, too?”

Iwaki gave Maou a look. “...She brought Ms. Ohguro in, remember.”

“Wow... Who *is* Chi anyway?”

“I always knew she was more than just another high school teen, but...”

“I’ll be on hand as well, of course,” Iwaki continued, a glint in her eyes. “And...”

“...so will Ms. Kisasi.”



“Wheeeeeeeeeere aaaare youuuu, Suuuuzuuuuunooooo?!!”

Back at home—and despite everything that had happened in the morning, and everything Chiho had said to him at work—Maou immediately started banging on the door to Room 202.

“My liege, calm down! Bell isn’t in the apartment right now!”

“What?!”

“Tonight she’s working in shifts with Emilia’s father to take care of the Yesod girl in our landlord’s house!”

“Oh, man...!”

He had no evidence, but he was convinced she planned to give him the slip all day along.

“D-damn it! She *knows* I hate going in that house!”

Chiho apparently had her phone off, and given the late hour, he hated to just drop into Shiba’s place without warning. Even if he did, he had no expectation Amane would tell him the truth—and going face-to-face with Suzuno right now was hard for him.

“You! You’re coming tomorrow, too, right? You heard nothing at all?!”

“Huh? No, um, I was just told to work like I always do, so...”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

Maou seemed tantalizingly close to figuring out the puppet master behind this, but he just couldn’t grasp who it was. It seemed like Chiho was the ringleader, with Suzuno and the Shiba family lending her their support—but why get the crew at MgRonald involved in this?

“This isn’t...just so they can feed Acieth, is it...?”

It was the likeliest explanation. They had been caring for Acieth for less than a week, but everyone involved was at their physical limit. Nothing about Alas Ramus’s condition had appeared in the information Suzuno was getting from Ente Isla, as of yet. With so many question marks ahead, maybe it was a good idea to exercise as many options at their disposal as possible.

She was just eating *so much*. Before, if she ate a ton, that would keep her proportionally full and happy for a while. Now nothing she ate seemed to fill her at all. It made Maou wonder whether someone had opened a Gate in her stomach. Consuming at *her* level was physically impossible, no matter how you attempted to explain it. But not only was she not getting full; she wasn’t even going to the bathroom.

Maou had yet to see Shiba herself around, but he knew Amane and Nord had been working the most on Acieth, with Suzuno and occasionally himself and Libicocco pitching in with some rice balls. Now, temporarily, Chiho had joined the team. That much he understood, and along those lines, the idea of using Shiba’s riches to rent out a MgRonald for the day and keep Acieth continually

fed made the most logical sense.

But there were still a few questions. Based on the number of rice balls she ate, was it really necessary to reserve an entire fast-food kitchen for her sake? They could've just phoned in a catering order for two hundred burgers or whatever, Maou felt—during his time there, he had seen businesses and student groups order sandwiches by the hundred several times before. Big shareholder or not, that would be a lot less money and hassle for Shiba than reserving an entire location. This was doubtlessly going to cost several times the total bill for Acieth's care so far, and Maou couldn't see any good reason to go through with it.

After all, many of the people called to man this event—Kisaki, Kawata, Akiko, and Iwaki, to be exact—knew nothing about Ente Isla. If they brought Acieth inside, all four of them were bound to start wondering who this bottomless pit of a young girl was. Part-time and full-time employees all had to sign a standard confidentiality agreement, of course, when they took on their jobs—but Kawata and Akiko, both normal college students, would find it pretty tough to keep quiet.

"I just don't get it! What are they even trying to do?!"

He really did need to storm into Shiba's house, right now, and find out. The time was now past one in the morning, but Maou, his mind made up, left his apartment, marched toward the dark form of the house next door as it loomed high—

"Hey you."

—and was stopped by a sudden voice along the road.

"Huh?"

A figure was standing there, underneath a streetlight. Maou didn't recognize him. He had a suit on, and between his face and his natural-looking blond hair, he didn't look ethnically Asian.

"Sorry, but can I ask you something?" he asked in fluent Japanese.

Maou was now on high alert. Here was this man, dressed perfectly neatly, in the middle of the night, in the middle of a shabby residential neighborhood. He

had sought out Maou, and despite the threat he knew he presented, he looked completely serene.

“Who’re you...?”

“I told you, I want to ask you something. You’re Sadao Maou, right?”

“Yes...”

He acted like he knew full well who Maou was.

“Don’t be so wary of me. I’m not here to hurt you. But would you mind going back home and turning in for the night? You’re about to walk into Mikitty’s house, aren’t you?”

“M-Mikitty?”

The name, one his unconscious mind tried so hard to fend off, made him realize everything. It was hard to tell, late at night under this streetlight, but there was a single non-blond lock of hair on the man. It was a straight yellow.

“Are you from Earth’s—”

“I know you think we’re meddling, but all of us are just as surprised. There’s no previous example of this, but—well—these things happen, we imagine. Tomorrow, apparently, we’ll have a wind blowing in from across the universe, helping that seed grow its first buds. So just sit back and watch, all right? The one who will birth the ‘eleventh’ of the Holy Cross shall not be you.”

Maou didn’t think he took his eyes off him, but one blink, and the man with the yellow shock of hair was now just a few inches from his face.

“You have work tomorrow, don’t you? Staying up late isn’t good for your health. Hurry up and sleep, child of the world.”

He didn’t feel any demonic force, or holy force, or physical force for that matter. But when the man went silent, Maou’s consciousness was suddenly drained from him in an instant—and thanks to that, he never even noticed the nine figures surrounding his apartment and Shiba’s house.

Maou had no memory of falling, but when he came to, it was morning and he was tucked inside his futon. Libicocco was in his own, on the other side of the table, snoring like he usually did. It was half past six, his usual wake-up time

when his shift started at nine.

Looking at the phone by his pillow—the charging cord helpfully plugged into it—Maou balled his hands into fists.

“What...the *hell*...?”

The man with blond and yellow hair. There was no doubting it: That man, the one who called his landlord “Mikitty,” was part of her family—from the Tiferet branch of Earth’s Sephirah. Probably one of the “overseas relatives” Amane and Shiba mentioned to him before, given that Amane Ohguro’s father was born from the Sephirah known as Binah.

The children of Earth’s Sephirah—in other words, his landlord’s family—were dotted across the planet, all enjoying prominent positions in society by the sounds of it. Amane was their direct descendant, but she bore none of the typical outward appearance of a Sephirah child—indicating, perhaps, that the man from last night was more of a direct Sephirah relation, the same as the landlord.

As a rule, their sole interest was in protecting Earth. Thus, Amane and the rest of them almost never took a direct role in affairs on Ente Isla. They reached out only when Alas Ramus, Acieth, and their other “distant relatives” were in danger—but despite being powerful enough to overwhelm Maou and his friends, he knew that he could never rely on them as allies in his battles. So why would one of Earth’s Sephirah children go through the trouble of blocking him when all he wanted to do was ask his landlord about the wild party she was planning at MgRonald today?

“He said something about the ‘eleventh’... What’s with that? What’s even going on here? What...?”

Were Chiho and Suzuno connected with them? Or did Amane, agreeing to lend them a hand, ask her own brethren for some assistance? Maou had no grasp at all, and it irritated him. But there was nothing to be done.

He sat up in his futon, rubbing his head.

“...?”

Then he heard someone climbing the stairs outside. Two someones... And one

of them, the moment they reached the outside corridor, came running with a light, nimble stride toward Room 201.

“Daddy! Daddy! Wake up! G’mornin’!”

The voice made Maou unconsciously tear up. Climbing to his feet, he opened the door gently, not wanting to run into the girl he pictured on the other side.

“Mommy! Daddy’s up! G’mornin’, Daddy!”

Alas Ramus—excited, beaming, and looking perfectly healthy—had both arms up as she looked at him.

“Sorry to bother you so early. I dunno why, but Alas Ramus insisted on seeing you, so...yaaawn...”

And behind her stood Emi, carrying a large shoulder bag and looking like she could use a nap.



Amazingly, it was Chiho from whom Emi ended up getting a call about everything that had transpired. Their talk began with a discussion of Acieth’s illness and whether Alas Ramus was all right, but Emi noticed midway that Chiho wasn’t her usual self. And so now:

“It was just, like, she was supposed to be going easy on reaching out to us, but this was kinda out of character for her. She was acting all rigid or something. Scared. I can’t really put my finger on it, but it just felt weird, so I came back a little early.”

Since Maou had agreed to take on some of her shifts, the plan was for her to pay a visit back no later than tomorrow.

“I tell you... Everybody’s starting to act crazy nowadays, aren’t they?” Libicocco, awoken by Emi’s arrival, was putting away the futons.

Maou nodded at him, then said to Emi, “So you didn’t face quite so many problems where you were?”

“No, there’s... There’s a mountain of problems...hhhaarwn...” Stifling a yawn, she began going over the events happening in and around Devil’s Castle Ente Isla.

By the time she'd arrived, Kinanna was already laying waste to the land (Gabriel's "kaiju" description was putting almost too cute of a spin on it). The Federated Order of the Five Continents, picking up on his demonic force, had deployed from Saza Quartus to the south to determine its origin. To the Devil King's Army, anticipating only the Crusade from the west, this was a bolt from the blue, and Emi—along with Albert, Laila, and the rest of the army's leaders—began to admit to themselves that innocent victims may now be a certainty.

"But it turned out that the group sent from Saza Quartus was led by Chief Rajid of Vashrahma."

"Rajid of Vashrahma? Wasn't that one of the people Ashiya negotiated with?"

"Yeah. And Emeralda and I kinda owed him a favor, too."

Chief Rajid Raht Rian, warrior leader of Vashrahma, had sent word to Saza Quartus's Federated Order forces that they were being sent to "slay a dragon." Picking up Kinanna's demonic force, he instinctively thought that Ashiya, as careful and dedicated as he was with his plans, would never pull something like this. Something unexpected must be afoot, he reasoned, and the scouts he sent out in advance told him about a gigantic, mountain-like dragon wreaking havoc across the land.

Ashiya had briefed Rajid in detail about his plans for the denizens of the demon realms and where they'd be moved to. The way Rajid saw it, if something wasn't done, the North and the West—still unaware of this project—might start taking unilateral action. Thus he declared this a dragon-slaying quest, explicitly adding that he had no interest in seizing territory, and deployed a few armies. This ensured that the Federation forces loyal to the emirates of Haruun, as well as the few affiliated forces remaining on the Central Continent, didn't try anything careless with him.

"That's impressive. But why's everyone so accepting of Vashrahma going on this dragon-slaying journey?"

"Well, Vashrahma is home to the Great Olidyra Desert...and they've had to deal with an annoying 'dragon' or two there as well."

Emi left it at that, her eyes staring off into the distance a bit.

“But anyway, long story short, Kinanna’s in *great* shape, and fortunately, not a single human’s lost their life over it. But I guess Bell being promoted to Archbishop had a huge impact on the world. I heard now and then from the North about how much trouble Lady Wurs and Farfarello are having.”

The Federated Order, as populated with natives from the Southern Island as it was, got in the way of the Church’s Crusade. That, to an unknowing observer, was the biggest ongoing conflict in Ente Isla—and thanks to it, the attitude among the Church knight corps in the North and the West was going from irritated to dangerous. The assorted excuses the Order was giving the knights had the effect of making the new Archbishop’s ordination and ceremonial parade overlap with the Crusade, essentially making the Order an enemy of every Church adherent in the world. The North had a sizable number of believers as well, and some of their clans were now openly criticizing Dhin Dhem Wurs’s actions.

“Once Bell’s official ordination is complete, that’s when the Church forces will really get moving. Alciel said the East would likely deploy the Eight Great Scarves at that point, but...”

“...And then they’re gonna encounter each other, huh?”

“Right.”

If the Church (unaware of anything) and the Eight Great Scarves knights (deliberately left in the dark) clashed, it was easy to imagine them going straight into all-out war. It would then become a matter of days before the embers drifted over to Devil’s Castle.

“The way Lucifer sees it, apparently launching Devil’s Castle, in and of itself, is already doable. But if we blast off now, the entire Central Continent could erupt into war, and if we try settling demons across the planet in *that* state of affairs...”

Emi paused to pat the head of Alas Ramus, currently playing with her smartphone in her lap. This was all for her happiness. That much hadn’t changed. But that didn’t mean it was okay to keep Ente Isla entangled in war forever.

“We can’t afford to botch the landing here. Right now, we’re just barely

holding on to a stalemate. If we want to do something about that, it's now or never."

Wurs, the Azure Emperor, and Rajid were all allied with the Devil King's Army, but that wasn't the only side they were involved with. If, instead of respecting the oral agreements they made with Ashiya, these world leaders decided it was more important to protect their own lands and interests, the planet would immediately split apart.

"After all, you know, even I worked alongside you and Libicocco. We can help Alas Ramus and the Sephirah children, but I don't want to hear you give me lip about 'Oh, poor *us*, the demon immigration thing failed and they're all dead now.'"

"Rather light way to put it, huh?"

"Well, sorry. The only demons I know personally are you guys, Camio, and the ones in Isla Centurum." Emi shrugged. "So anyway, Chiho told me Bell was over with you guys, which shocked me. But I figured it'd be a good chance for us all to talk about the future, so I talked Gabriel into letting me come back."

"The water wuz so big! An' cold!"

"Cold?"

Alas Ramus spread her arms out wide to demonstrate her point, accidentally throwing the phone aside in the process.

"Didn't Chiho tell you? About where Gabriel opened up his Gate? There's a cave east of Devil's Castle with a huge underground lake, and that's where I had him build the Gate for me. We got home last night."

"...Ah."

Now he had a grasp of the situation. Combining that with what Suzuno had told him yesterday (before she went on *that* tangent), there were no contradictions in his mind that needed explaining. But Maou still had a lot to dread.

"Sounds like you're at your wit's end over there, huh?"

"You said it. I think Rajid pulled a really smart move for us, but even *that's*

going to buy us another week or two at best.”

Looking at the calendar, there were four days left until the conclusion of the purification ritual Suzuno was (supposed to be) undergoing. That was likely all the time they’d have for making adjustments.

Once Suzuno returned to Ente Isla and received her ordination, there was no other stopping point they could seize to change the flow of things. They’d be guaranteed a future where, no matter what happened with Maou’s war against heaven, huge numbers of people would die.

“So anyway, Alas Ramus popped out of me demanding to see you first thing in the morning, so I forgot your umbrella. I’ll get it back to you later, okay?”

“Sure, um, anytime.”

“No, not ‘anytime.’ Soon. You hardly ever use that thing, even. I bought you a good one for a reason, you know—”

“Whoa! Can we *not* talk about that right now?”

Maou’s suddenly raised voice made Emi, Alas Ramus, and Libicocco all look at him wide-eyed.

“Huh? What? What’s with you all?”

“Just don’t talk about it. There’s no telling who might be listening in.”

For some reason, Maou’s eyes were squarely upon Libicocco.

“Wh-what? Did I do something wrong, my liege?”

“What’s your deal today?”

Maybe he didn’t want Libicocco to know that Emi had bought it for him; if Chiho were to find out and wasn’t prepared for it, she could understand his trepidation over what would happen next. But with anyone else, if he explained the whole story, it hardly seemed like something to be so embarrassed about...

“I just... I don’t wanna think about this extraneous stuff any longer... Eesh.”

But Maou looked honestly exasperated, so Emi dropped the subject.

“Daddy? You okeh? You hurt?”

Alas Ramus, apparently concerned over Maou's drained expression (and mind), climbed into his lap, reached out with her little hands, and mussed up his hair, still scraggly from just waking up.

"Ugghh... Daddy's a little tired right now, okay, Alas Ramus? How 'bout a hug?"

"Ooh! Hug!"

Alas Ramus, loving her father more than anything in the world, hugged Maou with all her might. Maou listlessly hugged her back.

"Hey, uh, did something happen to the Devil King?" Emi asked Libicocco in a hushed voice.

The demon shook his head. "...To be honest, I cannot say. Ever since that Yesod girl fell ill, everybody's been acting so unnatural."

"Oh, by the way, I'm assuming Alas Ramus never got sick?" Maou asked.

"She's been fine the whole time. That's why the news from Chiho surprised me so much. She's a little pouty about how I don't have much time to play with her right now, but..."

"Acieth's eating three hundred rice balls every day."

"...I heard *two* hundred."

"It varies day to day. You should watch her eat an entire half of a watermelon down to the bare rind before your eyes. It's straight out of a horror movie."

Then Maou gave Alas Ramus and Emi a quizzical raise of the eyebrow.

"I heard she started getting sick after you guys left for Ente Isla. You think she'll get better now that you're back?"

"Well, why don't we go visit her and find out? They asked us to bring food along whenever we do, so we can buy something at the convenience store—"

"No. Let's not."

"Huh...?"

A wave of anxiety spread across Room 201.

“You can’t go near the landlord’s house right now. *Epecially* not you.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“I’m not really sure she’s on our side right now.”

Maou clued Emi in on the events of late last night.

“Sephirah child or not, that’s a pretty amazing story... Libicocco, you didn’t see him?”

“Oh, right, I woke you up when I left the apartment at one AM, didn’t I? I was knocked out within five minutes of that.”

“Huh? Me? No, er... I went back to sleep, and then I woke up a moment ago... so I didn’t see anything.”

“Oh, *come* on. Guess I can’t blame you, but...”

If Maou had been snuffed out so effortlessly, chances were good that something had happened to Libicocco, too.

“Anyway, let’s just assume that there’s no way for us to see Chi or Suzuno right this moment. For whatever reason. Maybe *that’s* why she struck you as odd.”

“Are you saying that Ms. Shiba is trying to use Chiho for some purpose?”

“Well, I don’t *know*. That’s the thing. It might be the other way around, judging by how Chiho took Amane to MgRonald.”

Maou and Emi both shook at this undefinable anxiety.

“What about Father? He’s visiting their house to take care of Acieth, isn’t he? Is he home?”

“Oh, yeah, he is. Let’s talk to him while he’s here.”

All of them stood up and went downstairs. Maou rang the doorbell on Room 101. There was no reply.

“Hello? Father? I’m coming in!”

Having no other choice, Emi used her key to open the door.

“Oh, he *is* here.”

Nord was sleeping soundly on his futon.

“Father? It’s me. Can you wake up for one second? Hey... What’s with him?”

“Mommy, Grandpa’s weird!”

“Huh? Wh-whoa, Alas Ramus...”

Alas Ramus wriggled her way of Maou’s arms, nimbly removing her shoes and toddling up to Emi.

“Grandpa can’t wake up. He’s staying beddy-bye till the alarm.”

“The alarm? What do you mean?”

Emi frowned, looking concerned as she brought a hand to Nord’s forehead.

“Wait. Did that Tiferet guy do something to him? Or...”

The next moment, Emi picked up on something. She looked around.

“Wait. Where’s Erone?”

Erone, who should have been living in Room 101, was gone.

“*He* hasn’t gone berserk, too, has he?”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure we don’t have to worry about that again...”

Maou turned around as he spoke, Libicocco following his lead.

“Your Demonic Highness?”

“Who the hell is *that*...?”

Someone was on the roof of Shiba’s house, looking straight back at them. It was Tiferet, and he was even waving at them, as if chiding everyone there.

“Bastard. Treating us like idiots...”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“...It’s probably the landlord’s family that put Nord to sleep. I guess they wanna keep us in the dark as much as they can. And judging by how he’s not hiding it at all, I’d guess that Erone’s someplace where they can control his moves. They’re not gonna let him have a chance to act up again. Not *this* time. Ugh... Alas Ramus?”

“Yeh?”

“Do you know when Grandpa might wake up?”

“Yeh! For lunch!”

He had no idea why, but Alas Ramus seemed so sure of it—and it even seemed like that hateful blond-haired guy on the roof was nodding his agreement.

Maou winced. “All right. So they just want us to forget about this for now and wrap ourselves around their finger awhile longer, huh?”

He grunted, annoyed.

“Not to sound like a broken record...but I hate dealing with my landlord.”



The atmosphere around the Hatagaya Station McDonald that afternoon was disconcerting. They were open for business as usual until Amane’s reservation began at noon, but everyone staffing the place was on pins and needles, wondering what they were about to experience, and it certainly took the polish off their work performance.

“Great. If this keeps up...”

And Mayumi Kasaki, wearing her uniform on the front lines at Hatagaya for the first time in a while, was the same way.

Her reunion with Maou, Kawata, Akiko, and Emi was nothing if not awkward. One look at her expression, and everyone instantly realized that even she had no idea what was going on.

“I know we’ll be reserved all afternoon, Ms. Iwaki, but did they say anything about running deliveries?”

“Well, it’s strange, actually,” Iwaki replied, uncomfortably grinning at Kasaki’s question. “We were told there wouldn’t *be* any delivery orders, so don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, um...no?”

Maou never expected to see his former boss act so unnerved—not unless her

bitter college rival Himeko Tanaka was involved.

“Well, whatever happens, let’s just do the great job we always do. Marko, Kawacchi, Aki, Saemi... It’s been a while, but let’s knock it out of the park. It’ll be good working with you, too, Libicocco.”

“...You bet.”

Libicocco knew Kisaki only in passing, but he was all too aware of just how much Maou respected her, so he acted just as obedient to her as to Iwaki.

The crowd for the morning shift was no different from any other Sunday morning. A few customers voiced their appreciation that Kisaki was back for the day, while others did a double take at the sign announcing their afternoon closure, but nothing at all unexpected occurred. Only the employees knew that the closure was for a private event; all customers were told was that this was a onetime closure. (Otherwise, people would assume that MgRonald allowed the general public to reserve the whole place for private parties, which would pose problems.) The excuse given was that they needed to “replace some faulty kitchen equipment”; they even took a few regular items off the menu for extra plausibility.

So, despite their unease, Maou and the rest beavered away at their jobs. Apart from the pared-down menu, it was a completely typical morning. And then:

“...What’s...?”

Kisaki, of course, was the first to notice something strange. The moment the clock read eleven fifty, every single customer in the dining space began to get their things together, preparing to leave.

“Um... Huh?”

The diners all stood, as if answering some signal they’d worked out with one another in advance, and lined up by the trash can to drop off their trays. It didn’t even take five minutes for all of them to clear out of the restaurant.

“What was *that*? I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“No, neither have I.”

Kisaki and Iwaki both looked flustered, and for good reason. There had been a good thirty or so customers inside, eating or relaxing or chatting with one another. No matter what kind of restaurant you ran, customers never stuck to the letter of the law when it came to closing times like this. The sign at the front *did* say they closed at noon, but everyone on the crew assumed the last few stragglers would be out of there by twelve ten or twelve fifteen. But like a well-trained army, every one of them marched out of there five minutes before closing.

What's more, from that point forward, not a soul went inside until the clock struck noon. Even if the CLOSED sign was on the door; even if the PA out front was announcing the closure; even if crewmembers put all the chairs on top of tables and had the buffer out for a deep floor cleaning, there was always at least *one* customer who'd lumber on in. Today? Nothing. There was hardly even anyone passing by outside, especially compared to a normal Sunday.

"Come to think of it, Chi isn't here yet, is she...?"

"It's kind of eerie..."

"..."

Kawata's and Akiko's faces were tensed up. Maou, Emi, and Libicocco put themselves on high alert, prepared for whatever may come. It was easy to see it now—Amane and her cohorts were about to do something completely bonkers. Probably not *too* bonkers, if Chiho and Suzuno were involved, but if they wound up endangering Kisaki and the rest of the staff, it was up to Maou and his allies to protect them.

Then, as Maou slipped out from behind the first-floor registers and into the dining area, she appeared. The minute hand on the kitchen's wall clock had just shifted its way to high noon.

"Oh, good, I thought I'd be late! Ugh, it is just *blazing* outside... Ah, Maou! So good to see you again!"

"...Huh?"

"Wh-why is she...?"

It wasn't just Maou. Emi was just as taken aback this time.

“Oh, and *you’re* here, too, Yusa! Hello!”

Opening the neglected automatic doors, dabbing her sweat-moistened brow with a handkerchief, it was...

“Ah, and you must be the manager! Thank you for all the kindness you’ve shown Chiho! I heard you were recently transferred, but I am so happy I was invited to this!”

“Oh, ah, um, yes...‘invited’?”

Kisaki couldn’t be blamed for flailing like this. Before her was Riho Sasaki, Chiho’s mother—and for reasons nobody there could fathom, she was the first guest at this inscrutable private event, negotiated just yesterday by Amane in the name of her aunt. Why was she here? And...why had she been invited?

“Chiho told me, you see, about how all the employees’ families were going to be invited to this sort of thank-you party. She just recently left, but she said you were letting her join in anyway, so...”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry, your daughter said that?” Iwaki asked, Kisaki being too shocked to speak.

“Yes, I believe so, but...”

“...Oh, my apologies. My name is Iwaki; I’m the manager who took over in Kisaki’s place. Um... Well, to be honest, Ms. Sasaki, the whole restaurant’s been reserved for the event this afternoon...but we’re not sure *who’s* reserved it, or *what’s* going to be taking place, exactly.”

“No? Hmm. So why did Chiho call it a thank-you event, then...? Maou, Yusa, did either of you hear anything?”

“N-no, ma’am.”

“Me neither. Sorry.”

Maou and Emi could only give her the truth.

“Well, huh...”

Riho looked just as confused. An uneasy silence fell over them all, Kawata, Akiko, and Libicocco quietly watching.

Then:

“Oh, a car...”

A black sedan stopped in front of the McRonalD, drawing everyone’s attention. A man, presumably the chauffeur, opened up the rear seat—and the person who stepped out turned everyone’s eyes into dinner plates.

“...Chi?”

“Chiho? What is that girl *doing*...?”

Even with Maou there, it was likely Riho who was the most surprised of them all. This was a luxury car, the kind you’d need to be a corporate board member or high-level politician to go around in. Seeing their daughter hop out in street clothes would make *any* parent wonder.

She was soon followed out of the car by a queasy-looking Acieth, Suzuno giving her a supporting hand. Lastly, from the front passenger seat, Amare stepped out—in formal wear, a rarity for her. She led the rest of the group through the automatic doors, marched right up to Iwaki, and gave a little bow.

“Ms. Iwaki, thank you again for going out of your way to accommodate this sudden, unusual request.”

“Oh, no, um, we’re glad to do business with you, so...”

“I also need to apologize to you, Ms. Kizaki, for interrupting your no-doubt busy schedule.”

“Ah, um, no problem...”

“Chiho Sasaki here, you know, she insisted on enjoying your attendance here, so...”

Amare turned toward Suzuno, who was currently helping Acieth to her seat at a table that the kitchen had a good view of.

“All right, Amare,” chimed in Chiho, “I’m going to get changed. Ms. Iwaki, is my uniform still on top of the lockers?”

“Y-yes, um, right where I left it earlier.”

“Thanks a lot. Oh, Mom, you’re here early! I’ll be ready in just a second, so

have a seat, okay?”

“Hmm? What’re you talking about, Chiho? I—I’m not sure what you want me to...ah.”

Chiho, not waiting to hear her mother’s reaction, quickly disappeared into the staff room.

Everybody on hand was thoroughly confused. But nobody there—not Iwaki or Kisaki, nor Kawata or Akiko—felt it right to cross-examine their “customers” Suzuno and Acieth about this. And while Maou, Emi, and Libicocco all wanted to yell at Suzuno right this moment, they couldn’t while their boss was right there.

“Boy, uh... Thanks? All these people, they come here for me, and all...”

““Huh?””

But even *they* had to react to Acieth, who sounded like a pop idol saying hello to her fans to kick off a concert.

If everyone was here “for her,” then Amane and Chiho must’ve intended to have the crew cook up a storm for Acieth after all. But this whole red-carpet ceremony seemed way too exaggerated for that. Nothing about it made sense—Riho’s presence in particular. Nobody could’ve felt more awkward being here right now; she’d expected this fun little mixer, and not only was it *not* that, but nobody in attendance had any idea what they were supposed to do. Plus, she was all but a stranger to almost everyone here.

A good five minutes passed by, everyone sitting silently as the awkwardness weighed stiflingly upon them. Then:

“Sorry to keep you guys!”

Straight into the awkwardness walked Chiho, a much more familiar-looking sight in her McGonald uniform. She looked at Amane; Amane lightly nodded back.

“Ms. Iwaki, Ms. Kisaki... Kawata, Akiko, Mom... I’m sure all of you must be really confused right now. I’m sorry if this seems kind of weird to you.”

She made a mysterious apology to five in attendance, mentioning each one by name in order. It made Maou’s veins freeze. The only people she apologized to

were the five who knew nothing of Ente Isla.

“Ah, Chiho...?!”

Emi must have noticed the same thing. But Chiho just gave her a quick look then promptly turned back toward Iwaki and the others.

“So this afternoon, we’re all going to be cooking up some food for this girl. But as you’re all about to find out, she can eat a lot. And I mean a *lot*. A hundred burgers, two hundred; that’s just for starters.”

“Oh, right, I *thought* I knew her! Didn’t she eat, like, nearly forty burgers here once? I think that girl in the kimono was here with her, too...”

The combination of Acieth and Suzuno jogged Kawata’s memory.

“Forty?” exclaimed Kisaki, eyeing Acieth and Kawata in order before recalling something of her own. “Wait... You know... I think I’ve seen her here before. Her...and *you*, too.”

Amane raised her eyebrows. “I’m impressed you remember. I think I’ve only been here once.”

“No, um... I’m sorry, I just remembered because it felt like you glared at me a little before you left...”

“Oh, did I? Well, maybe...”

Amane seemed to recall this herself.

“This is fine and all,” Kisaki said, “but Chi, can you start explaining yourself a little? All we’ve been told is that this is for a ‘private event.’ So what’s going on? I know we have Ms. Ohguro from SHIBA Industries and this young lady as customers, and we’re ready to do our best for them—but if you’re involved, too, then it’s not really adding up any longer.”

“You’re right. But I think before too long...”

“Ah...*gn, gnnh...*”

“Look out! Chiho, I think she’s reached her limit!”

“...It wasn’t enough after all, huh? She ate a pretty decent amount before we left, but... Okay! Maou! Yusa! Please take the apple pies in the machine right

now and serve them all to Acieth! Libicocco, bring out all the salads that're ready in the fridge!"

"Huh? Whoa, wait! Didn't she eat at all?!"

"She did, but she just can't hold out! She's already gone through a hundred rice balls today!"

"Wh-what? You're kidding!"

"Quit jokin' with us!"

Maou, Emi, and Libicocco, all astounded to see Acieth still hungry, promptly went on the move. The others were still frozen in place.

"Acieth! Hold out for me! Just a little bit longer!"

"*Unghh...* No... I can't..."

"Whoa! Stop right there! Amane, why're you just standing there?! Do you have any, like, mints on you or something?!"

Maou was shouting now, ignoring his aghast manager. But Amane seemed to be all but ignoring him.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Sasaki, but could you move back a little bit? It could be dangerous around her."

"Huh? Um, all right. Um?"

In fact, she was now keeping Chiho's mother behind her, all but ready to allow Acieth to fall out of control.

"Suzuno! Do something! The apple pies need a run through the fryer first! We need at least one more minute!"

"What, what do you want *me* to do...?"

"Chiho! Amane! Bell! What are you all *doing*?! If this keeps up...!" Emi, unable to parse these events, yelled at Chiho and the others, seemingly encouraging Acieth to begin wrecking the place.

And then, the next moment, it was all too late:

"Ah, *ahhhhhhhh!!!*"

“Wha—”

“Huh?!”

“What, what, what’s *that*?!”

“Whoa, what on...?!”

“Agghh!”

With a bloodcurdling scream, Acieth’s eyes and mouth began to emit beams of sharp purple light—in plain view of Kisaki, Iwaki, Kawata, Akiko, and Riho. But they each had just a moment to express their shock before:

“*Nrgh!!*”

It was Emi and Maou who went on the move. The light ray from Acieth’s mouth was headed directly for Kisaki. Emi and Maou both leaped over the counter, erecting barriers of demonic and holy magic in front of their former boss. The beam hit both barriers at the same time.

“Ah!”

The beam changed its trajectory, attempting to skirt around the holy barrier.

“Ahhgh!”

Then it deflected off Maou’s demonic barrier, slamming right through the table next to them as it pulverized a chair and gouged a hole in the wall.

“Libicocco! *Feed* her something! I don’t have any force left! I can’t hold this!”

“O-okay!!”

Maou’s shout propelled Libicocco into action. He lifted the basket from the fryer, grabbing the five apple pies Maou had thrown in with a single hand.

“Huh? Whoa! If you do that, you’ll burn yourself...!” Akiko exclaimed in understandable alarm. After all, he had just watched a man grab apple pies that had just been submerged in three-hundred-degree oil with his bare hand.

But Libicocco had no time to hesitate. He made a bull rush for Acieth, pies in one hand and a salad prepackaged in a plastic cup in the other.

“Hey! Push it in from there!”

Handing the salad to Suzuno, he used his fingers to pry open her mouth, then shoved the piping-hot apple pies inside.

“Worph!”

And with that, the beams of light vanished.

“Mmmph!”

“Whoa!”

With nothing battering against their barriers any longer, Emi and Maou were suddenly thrown off balance and to the floor. And Chiho, in the background for all of this, watched on as Acieth was virtually force-fed, like a goose being prepped for foie gras.

“I don’t think,” she observed, “that’s gonna last five minutes. Ms. Iwaki? Ms. Kisaki?”

“...Huh?”

“Chi... What was that...?”

“I’ll explain everything in order as we work. But it’s pretty much what you’ve just seen. This girl, Acieth Alla, needs to be continually fed, or else those light beams are gonna keep destroying everything around her. So...for starters, I’d like a hundred hamburgers and fifty cheeseburgers ASAP, please.”

“A—a hundred-fifty burgers?!”

“I know you had enough inventory delivered to you yesterday! Please hurry! We’re gonna see more death rays soon!”

“Let’s go, Ms. Kisaki!” Maou shouted at her from the floor as she stood frozen. “I don’t know what’s going on, but Chi’s telling us the truth! Kawacchi! Aki! Ms. Iwaki! She’s gonna wreck the building if we don’t step up! Hurry!”

“Hurry...? But...”

This unthinkable string of events was still too much for the afternoon crew of a MgRonald franchise to handle. Chiho invited herself behind the counter and began operating a register, switching it to order mode. Akiko was the first to respond to it.

"I—I dunno what's up, but we gotta just do this, huh?"

“Ohki?!”

“Ms. Iwaki! This makes no sense whatsoever, but if we got an order in, we gotta fill it! I think it’s one of those things where we gotta ‘do’ first and ask questions later! You too, Kawacchi!”

“Ah, ahh...”

“Um, okay...?”

Akiko's encouragement—or really, the HAMBURGER-100 line flashed on the monitors in assorted locations around the kitchen—kindled something in the instincts of the crew.

“...Well, all right! Marko! Chi!”

Finally, the volcano began to rumble.

"Nobody's going home today until we get to the bottom of this!"

With that, Kisaki flew into the kitchen and started cooking.

“So we just gotta keep feeding her, right?! Marko, Kawacchi, Aki, you guys focus on burgers! Ms. Iwaki, work those fryers and keep the fries and apple pies flowing, please! Saemi, I want a full inventory of everything we got in reserve, in case we run out of anything. When you have a moment, back up anyone that needs help! I’ll start running desserts and drinks upstairs! Chi and Libicocco, you’ll be serving and assisting the cooks! All of you got your headsets on?!”

""""""""Right!""""""""

At Kisaki's instruction, the seven of them thrust themselves into their work. Suzuno, emptying the last of the salad back at the table, felt the need to speak up.

“Ch-Chiho! Let me join you...”

But:

“Chi! Libicocco! Don’t cause trouble for our customers!”

Kisaki's scolding—meant more to dissuade Suzuno than Chiho—struck sharply home.

“Please, everyone, feel free to take a seat as you wait. You too, Ms. Sasaki. Ms. Ohguro, just sit back and let the MgRonald crew take care of things.”

“V-very well.”

“Okay...”

“Wow, you switch gears pretty fast, huh? I hate to say it, but you’re a real good boss...”

Suzuno, Riho, and Amane each took a seat, wowed (or cowed) by Kisasi’s inner strength. Once everyone was settled, Kisasi gave them a satisfied smile, turned on her headset mic, and yelled out in her clear, resonant voice.

“All right, people! We’re experiencing a lot of firsts today, but we can work through this! Let’s rock!”

“Okay!”

“Also! Chi, Marko, Saemi, I have a *lot* of questions once we’re on top of things a little, so get ready!”

“R-right...”

“I hear you...”

No matter how outlandish this was, it all came down to providing food for customers as quickly as possible. Once everyone was on the same page with that, the crewmembers trained by Kisasi never lost sight of their mission. (If anyone *had* lost sight of it, it was Maou and the other Ente Islans, the ones fully aware of what made Acieth tick.)

As he backed up Kawata, currently stationed at the grill and overseeing a few dozen patties at once, Maou chanced a glance at Acieth and Suzuno next to her. When their eyes met, Suzuno blushed and made a very pointed effort to turn away.

“...!”

“...Is *now* really the time for that?!”

Apparently her declaration of feeling for him wasn’t just her getting carried away. She appeared to be dragging it along still, inside her mind. But Maou was

prepared for the worst. *He* was still in the same place—amid this odd mix of Japan and Ente Isla. But it was Chiho who'd thrown him into all this, though he still had no idea why Amane, Shiba, and her family had agreed to it, too. *But what's happened has happened. There's no turning back now.*

"We can think *after* this is over!"

"Hey, Marko! What're you doing?! We're never gonna cook a hundred-fifty burgers unless we're working all three platens at once!"

"Ahh, sorry, Kawacchi! I'll be right there!"

At long last, he dove into the kitchen, fulfilling his role as a Class A crewmember at the Hatagaya MgRonald. Come to think of it—the thought just popped into his mind—but just recently, he had been griping about how all he was allowed to do in the war against heaven was stay here and live life like everything was normal, wasn't he?

"Not that I wanted *this* kind of development, but..." he exclaimed to himself as he faced up to the grills, the air shimmering with heat.



It was now nine in the evening. Everybody was exhausted, but no one had dared to try leaving. Acieth was asleep.

The statistics were nothing short of terrifying. In the past nine hours (more or less), the number of burgers she had gone through alone was threatening to pass five hundred. She just ate, and ate, and ate, making the staff concerned about their remaining inventory. The attendees who weren't in on Acieth's true nature, looking on as she vacuumed all the burgers and fries and drinks and sides—*ohhh*, all the sides—into her mouth, could do nothing but gape in horror. And even with all that work, the MgRonald dining space was down two tables and four chairs and now sported two holes—one in the ceiling, another in a wall—that would likely need repair before the location could be open to the public again.

In the midst of it all, Kisasi and Iwaki, Kawata and Akiko, and Riho received the full rundown in bits and pieces from Maou, Emi, Amane, Suzuno, Libicocco, and Chiho. There was, to say the least, a lot to discuss—but the crux of it, in the

end, all came down to the world of Ente Isla.

They all listened on, too amazed to say anything. Riho, in particular, seemed pretty shell-shocked—after all, one of her daughter's friend circles was essentially a race of inscrutable, hyperdimensional beings. Kisaki, seeing the blood drain from Riho's face from her adjacent seat, groaned.

"If I may ask a question?"

"...Yes?" Maou said, hunching up a little at Kisaki's stern tone. Now that everything was gradually being revealed, she'd be realizing soon that he had been lying about himself the whole time. He doubted she was willing to let that slide...but Kisaki had a surprise for him.

"So now that we know all of this...are we gonna be allowed to live?"

"What?"

"Huh?"

It threw both Maou and Chiho, the organizer of this event, into disarray.

"The Hero and Devil King of another world... That's...a national secret or something, right? And now that we all know... I mean, are you going to use us as sacrificial pawns for your mission, or kill us to keep us from talking, or something?"

"N-no! No, not at all!! We're not *monsters* or anything!"

"And I was born in Japan, keep in mind! I didn't even meet Maou and everyone until about a year ago, so there's no 'national secret' about this! Why are you asking about *that*?"

"Why *wouldn't* I ask about that?! Don't you see? We've all been suddenly dragged into this, given this wild story, and we've got nothing to deny it with! And by the looks of it, Marko and Saemi and Libicocco were all prepared to keep it secret from us forever, unless something happened!"

Kisaki hit the table with her fist, startling Iwaki, Kawata, and Akiko.

"And looking at you people at work... Casting weird magic to block these death rays, flying around, jumping out the second-story window like it was nothing... It's all so unbelievable! And...Marko! That little kid that appeared at

Saemi's feet and started playing with Ms. Ohguro! You said that was *your* relative when you brought her in, didn't you, Chi? I *saw* it! She just appeared out of thin air! What's even the *deal* with all of this...?!"

Explaining what "the deal" was with all of this would require starting over with their description of Ente Isla. But Maou was far more curious about why Chiho, Suzuno, and Amane had decided to set this whole stage just so they could reveal it all to *this* particular set of people.

"Well, listen," Maou calmly began, attempting to assuage his former manager. "This isn't exactly the conclusion I was looking for, but us coming to Japan—and taking work here at MgRonald, for that matter—was a total coincidence. There wasn't any deep reason behind it. We needed money to live, and that was it. And, Ms. Kisaki, me wanting to become salaried and help you with your work... None of that was a lie! It's how I really feel! And I hope you're willing to believe me!"

"*That's* what you're hoping I believe right now?! Because I think you have a lot more to explain than *that* at the moment!"

Maou's carefully chosen words simply led to more anger.

"Because... I don't think any of us knows how we should interact with you now..."

"Th-that..."

And this was *Kisaki*. To Iwaki, Kawata, Akiko, and Riho, there even seemed to be an element of fear involved with them all. To Maou and Emi, who had lied to them for months and each possessed enough power to quickly end their lives, they didn't see a way to regain everyone's trust, no matter how long they talked to them.

"...When I first learned about Maou and everyone, I was the exact same way."

"...Chi?"

"They showed me all this unbelievable power. I was so scared all the time... Like, we had been friendly for so long, so how should I deal with them now? But..."

Chiho flashed a glance at Emi, then her mother.

“I realized that, in the end, my feelings are always gonna be my own.”

Then, suddenly, she fell silent. She kicked her legs around a bit, fidgeting.

“Um... I’m kind of embarrassed to say this, right here and everything...but I, uh... Both before, and after, he revealed himself, I’ve always... I’ve always been in l—*ah*, um, in love with him...so...”

“““““We know.”””””

“Huh?! Wh-why?!”

The choir of voices hit Chiho like a shock wave.

“Why? Don’t tell me you were trying to *hide* it, Chi.”

“I think pretty much anyone would’ve picked up on it.”

Akiko’s and Kawata’s observations made her instantly blush.

“...Yes, well, there’s a pretty good chance your father’s noticed, even.”

“No!”

Even her mother was funning with her. Chiho began squirming with her entire body, hands on her cheeks.

“M-M-Maou, what am I gonna doooo?! I—I had no idea everybody at home and MgRonald knew...!”

“Wh-why are you asking me?!”

“What is with you guys...?”

Amane, supporting the napping Alas Ramus on her lap and opting to remain a spectator up to now, let out a peeved yawn.

“Aww... B-but if everyone knows, then okay! I—I—I—I love Maou, whether everyone knows the truth or not, and I actually already told him before!”

“Huh?!”

Kawata had the biggest reaction to this.

“And he’s been deferring his reply for nearly a year now!”

“Well, *that’s* the most outrageous thing I’ve heard all day! I didn’t know he was that kind of person!”

“Wow, Maou. No way. Not a whole year! That’s crazy!”

If looks could kill, Kawata and Akiko had just brutally murdered Maou.

“Why are you all torturing me here?”

All he could do was curl up on his newfound bed of nails.

“So, um, like I was saying...! We organized today for Acieth’s sake, yes, but even more than that, it’s for you, Mom!”

“Huh? Me?”

Riho, pointed out by her daughter, raised her head up. Chiho was at the end of her rope, but her eyes showed true dedication, even as courage and fear intermingled within them.

“Mom, I wanted you to...recognize my dreams for the future, so, you know, that’s why I caused all this trouble. I’m sorry.”

“Chiho...what are you talking about? I’m sorry, I’m still so confused...”

“Mom... Mom, what kind of life do you want me to lead?”

“Huh? Where did *that* question come from?” Riho blinked helplessly.

“Because for me,” Chiho went on, “my dream is to eat together with Maou and Yusa, and Ashiya and Urushihara and Suzuno and everyone else, whenever we want to. But the way things are...that’s going to be impossible before too long. I’m gonna go to college, of course. But... Mom, I want you to know all about the people I truly love. I want you to know about what’s most important to me right now. So I talked with them. I created this whole thing so you could understand, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Ente Isla exists. The same way that I did.”

“And that’s...today?”

“Yeah. Like I said, there were a few other reasons, too, but...”

Now Chiho turned to Kisaki and the rest of the crew.

“I need to apologize to all of you as well. It’s all a bunch of nonsense. and I’m

sure you're all hopelessly confused...but for a little while to come, Acieth needs to stay here, in Japan. And if she's like that at a time like this, we couldn't keep it going alone. Right now, if Maou and everyone want to deal with the problems they're facing, a healthy Acieth is a must-have. So if we want to work through these control issues, we needed the facilities and staff of a fully fitted MgRonald, and also..."

Chiho looked down at Acieth. She had started to lightly snore.

"...Also, Acieth's just *terrible* at keeping secrets. So I wanted to let her go around to more places than just her apartment building and Ms. Shiba's house. So I did it, and I didn't consider any of *your* feelings or needs when I did. So I'm really sorry for that."

She deeply bowed to Kisaki, Iwaki, Kawata, and Akiko in order. The last three were still nothing short of bewildered. Only Kisaki wasn't.

"Lift your head up. You don't need to do that."

Chiho did as told.

"MgRonald is supposed to be a place where visitors can relax and enjoy a good meal. If the Hatagaya Station location served that purpose for that girl today, then all of us take joy from that. There's no need for an apology. If you need to apologize to anyone here...it's to Marko, Saemi, and Libicocco, isn't it?"

"Huh...?"

"It's obvious to me they had no idea you were planning this. I imagine, now that you've blown their cover, they're going to face a lot of difficulties in their lives. I'm sure you were aware of that."

"...I was."

"So why?"

"Because it probably won't bother them. That's why I chose the people I did. I mean...you're back to normal now, aren't you, Ms. Kisaki?"

"Well, that... I'm a grown woman. And we've known each other long enough that we've built a common trust..."

"I know there are a lot of 'grown' people out there who unconditionally hate

anything they don't know about, like a child."

Chiho sounded surprisingly stern as she fired back.

"But Ms. Kisaki, even after everything she's done today, you referred to Acieth as a 'customer.' When I punched a hundred burgers into the register, Akiko immediately sprang into action. The burgers Kawacchi made always looked exactly like they do in the TV ads. Ms. Iwaki, you arranged the order for the sides to be delivered so she had a constant variety to enjoy. All of you... Whether they're from Hatagaya or another planet, I trusted that you'd treat them all just as well. Even if it was a shock to you...I thought that, as a fellow native of Japan, if I staked my life on convincing you all, you'd understand. And you're already jabbing at Maou like usual, aren't you, Kawacchi and Akiko? So..."

Tears were forming in her eyes as the adults in the room listened to the young girl speak. She was involving the whole world in her quest now—a quest to make them accept the truth, and the people that she loved. To make all these people around her—just a small corner of Japanese society, but living in a world larger than any high school teen could comprehend—understand.

"Mom, when I grow up, I want to live for the sake of the people of Ente Isla."

"Chiho. You... That..."

"No. For the people of Ente Isla *as well*. I was born here, on Earth, in Japan. My family's in Sasazuka."

Everyone in the restaurant, and others who weren't, were on her mind as she spoke.

"I want to be an adult who can cherish my homeland, my family, and everybody here just as much. It's just that my group and Maou's group are like two polar opposites. So...Mom, I need to ask you something. I promise I'll never ask for something so self-centered ever again. Will you please allow me, just this once, to save a world?"

"Self-centered" didn't begin to cover it. What intention was there, what prospects for success, that drove a mere human like Chiho to strive for more than what she was already doing? But only those who didn't see today coming

were visibly shaken by the words. Suzuno and Amane watched on, their expressions unchanged.

“...Chiho, I just don’t know what you’re saying any longer.”

But despite it all, that was probably the most open-minded response she could have expected. Most people would’ve broken down in panic by this point. The man her daughter had an unrequited crush on wasn’t even from this planet. He and his cohorts had tricked everybody around them. But...

“But I’m your mother. I know that Maou and his friends are, um, decent people. There were...well, several times when I’m glad I trusted in them.”

There was no way anyone could fully measure the words, and emotions, couched in that “well.” Riho was full to bursting with them. But she held out:

“...I have two conditions.”

Her pointer finger went up in the air.

“First, promise me you’ll go to college, even if you need to take a gap year in between. One in Japan...or Earth, I guess I should say, maybe? One *here*, I mean.”

Now the middle finger joined it.

“Second, listen to what people around you say and try not to get sick or hurt. If you can stick to those two rules...well, whenever we have to talk to your father about it, I’ll take your side.”

“Oh, Mom!”

Wiping the flowing tears away, Chiho gave her mother a big nod. It made Kisaki fondly recall a moment from her own past.

“...Ms. Kisaki?”

“No, um, I know this is strange to bring up right now...”

Watched over by the Sasaki, Kisaki turned toward her coworker Iwaki.

“But I just remembered—my mother said the same thing to me. It was just when I began to have a dream I was pushing myself toward. She just told me to go to some kind of college and keep myself in good health... It’s funny, huh? I

guess parents all think the same thing that way.”

“Hmm... I wonder. I never really had a set dream for the future, so I don’t think my parents ever said that. I was always kind of an obedient child, though.”

Kawata and Akiko listened to the grown-ups speak.

“...Yeah. I mean, if I’m just gonna take over our restaurant, there’s no pressing need for me to go to school...but I have no idea why Mom and Dad are so insistent on it...”

“Well, my parents were so set on it that it honestly chafed on me a lot, but...I think there’s a big difference between experiencing only the world of your own hopes, and getting to pursue them after being exposed to a lot more options. You talked about how you could use what you learned in school for your business, right, Kawacchi?”

Both of them were adults, in the legal sense of the term, but neither of them really felt like it yet. They crossed their arms as they mused to themselves.

“Still... A Devil King and a Hero, huh? Heh-heh-heh...”

“And *that’s* why you called him ‘my liege’ now and then, huh, Libby?”

“Y’know, Marko,” Kisaki said, “if all this is true, that means you’re a lot older than us, doesn’t it? Maybe we shouldn’t call you by a nickname, huh?”

“How about I call you ‘Your Highness’ like Libby does?” Iwaki asked.

“Huh? N-no, please, don’t! If Ms. Kisaki and Ms. Iwaki start calling me that, I’m gonna be too freaked out to work. Please, just stick to what you’ve been calling me all along, okay? I mean it.”

“Wow. Okay.”

“Weirdo.”

But the two managers whom Maou respected so much, despite their misgivings, smiled at him.

“I want to ask you. Is it possible for us to...you know, visit your homeland or whatever?”

Chiho, despite the tears running down, was the first to reply.

“It’s a forty-minute trip each way!”

That made all of Chiho’s precious friends from Japan open their mouths wide.

“““““That’s *close*!!”””””



“W-wow...”

“What on...!”

“The—the wind, the smells...”

“I can’t believe it, but...”

“This is...just...”

Kawata and Akiko, Iwaki and Riho, and finally Kisaki were at a loss for words.

Not terribly long ago, they were all on the first floor of the Hatagaya MgRonald. Right now, they were atop a steep, precipitous hill, battered by a strong wind. Beneath them spread Phiyenci and its Goat Pasture, the biggest city in Ente Isla’s Northern Island.

“This is *not* Japan! It’s *totally* not Japan!”

“I—I know, Aki! Quit pushing me! There’s not any fence!”

“Wh-what’s that city?! This is... Whoa. You’re kidding me. Is that a *goat*? It looks like it’s the size of an elephant!”

“...We’re on what’s known as the Northern Island, one of the continents of Ente Isla. Chiho knows a lot of people in that city. Oh, um, Kawata, you should step back a bit. The ground looks a little loose over there.”

“Yusa, what are you doing?! Huh?! Why are you just floating in the air like that’s completely normal?! Wha?! There’s no ground there, right?!”

“Oh, s-sorry. I just wanted to be there in case Kawata lost his balance and fell.”

“Ugh... I think I’m starting to feel dizzy.”

“Ms. Iwaki? Are you okay?”

As Emi dealt with Kawata, Akiko, and Iwaki on the edge of the hill, Chiho,

Suzuno, Kisaki, and Riho were looking down at Phiyenci below, grave looks on their faces.

“Oh, man... I... I’m just completely amazed by this... And you were talking about *saving* this world? Ente Isla? And this is just a tiny part of it, right? What’re you gonna *do*, even?”

“Well, in a little while, a really big war’s going to break out. One big enough to turn the whole world on its side. But whether a lot of people have to die in this war or not rides on what we do over the next few days.”

“Oh... And that’s why that girl Acieth needs to be healthy for you? You sure it was okay to leave her at MgRonald?”

Amane, Acieth, and Libicocco had all stayed behind, as well as Maou, who deemed it too dangerous to fuse with Acieth in such an unstable state.

“One time in the past, one of Acieth’s companions went completely out of control, but in a different way from her. We managed to get him calmed down with Yusa’s powers, though. Right now, it’s safer for him—and her—to stay on Earth, for assorted reasons.”

“Chiho, let me just say, I’m not going to pay for the damage your friend did to the restaurant, okay?”

Riho looked genuinely anxious.

“Do not be concerned, Riho,” Suzuno replied. “Amane is a distant relative of Acieth, you could say. Any damage they cause will be covered by either ourselves or the Shiba family.”

“Oh, uh, will it? Well, that’s good... Wait, that’s *not* good. Ms. Kisaki is right, Chiho—what *are* you going to do? You talked about saving the world, but if this is a video game, then isn’t the last boss of it working at your MgRonald right now?”

Even at this point, the thought of a marauding Devil King working fast food to make ends meet was ridiculous.

“Wellll, about that... Suzuno?”

“Yes. Currently, all the world’s main military forces are just about to clash

with one another at a single point. In the middle of that point is Devil's Castle, our base in this world. However, the Devil King's Army is currently trying to shift the structure of the world to something new. We want to keep any casualties that result to a bare minimum...but as things stand now, we could very well see all four continents at war with one another by the morrow, and all our efforts could wind up for naught."

"I—I see... It sounds like something from a history textbook..."

"And that is what Chiho is trying to prevent."

"But how? I mean, Chiho's a normal teen. She's great at cooking and archery, but...you know, just because she's gotten acquainted with this world doesn't mean that, um, she can float in the air like Yusa over there, right?"

Suzuno answered the fretful question by pointing straight ahead. "Riho... Kisaki... It is a bit far away, but can you see a column in the middle of the large open area inside town, shining in the light?"

"Yes, I do. Looks like it's made of glass, or ice."

"It is actually a spear of ice, one that was planted on the spot through the use of what you could call this planet's dark force. It was Chiho's skills with a bow and arrow that created it."

"..."

Kisaki fell silent, unsure how to respond.

"Ohh, I think I'm getting a fever..."

Riho, meanwhile, was attempting to escape from reality.

"You see, Chiho has a unique weapon, one that no one else on Ente Isla can lay claim to. With that force, I firmly believe we can avoid the tragedy that an all-out war will bring. I am not being rash or thoughtless when I say that... Ah, but our friends are coming shortly."

"Huh? Friends?"

It was Emi who replied first, a bit surprised.

"Bell? Which friends are these?"

Suzuno turned toward Emi, looking a bit remorseful. But instead of answering, she conjured a ball of holy magic in her palm and sent it flying.

“Is—is that magic?!”

In the space that Kisasi exclaimed her surprise, three figures suddenly appeared in the precipice above Phiyenci.

“Alciel! Lucifer! Gabriel?!”

“Gahhhh!! Someone’s here!!”

“Aki, I told you, stop *pushing*!!”

Ashiya, Urushihara—sporting a pair of black wings—and Gabriel—wearing a T-shirt with SHIBUYA! on it in block letters, demonstrating that his lack of fashion sense was still going strong—were there.

“Boy, it’s a *group* tour now, huh?”

“Dude, isn’t this, like, a lot more people than what we talked about?”

Gabriel and Lucifer seemed less than impressed as they bantered among themselves. Meanwhile Ashiya, in human form, alit in front of Kisasi and Riho, took a knee, and lowered his head.

“Ms. Sasaki, Ms. Kisasi, and everyone from MgRonald,” Ashiya greeted. “I am sure this comes as a great surprise to you. I cannot even begin to apologize for being so untruthful with you before now...but this I promise: Chiho Sasaki is the final hope of all who live and breathe upon our planet, Ente Isla. And I swear upon the name of my master that she will never veer from the correct path.”

“Er, yes...”

“Um, Ashiya, you...”

Kisasi and Riho nodded, despite it all.

“Alciel,” Suzuno retorted, “the Devil King has just finished making a complete ass of himself on the other side. I am not sure swearing upon his name is very convincing at the moment.”

“Silence, Bell. If you were more prudent in what you... Ah, but enough of that. Chiho, what do you think? Do you really want to have your mother along?”

“Huh?! On what?!”

“Yes, I was hoping it’d be possible to.”

“Wait, Chiho, I—I didn’t hear anything about this!”

Being taken “along” on something made her mother panic. Chiho calmly sized her up.

“I just thought that when I say I’ll ‘save the world,’ that probably wouldn’t make much sense to you. So I wanted you to come down and see things for yourself. If you need to go back, we can take you back in forty minutes like before, so don’t worry.”

“D-don’t worry? You’re—”

“Hold it, Bell! Alciel! What’re you gonna do with Chiho and her mother?!”

Riho wasn’t the only one concerned. Emi was just as disconcerted by this sudden development.

“What? I thought you had been briefed on our upcoming plans, Emilia... Bell told you nothing?”

“Huh?”

“I... I am sorry. I thought Alciel had informed you before your return to Japan, Emilia.”

“Huuuh?! ”

A couple wires had apparently gotten crossed. But the way things were going, Emi being told the news right now wouldn’t change plans much.

“Devil’s Castle,” Ashiya said, “will be launched one month ahead of schedule. But before it can, we need to make certain arrangements...and depending on who handles these arrangements, we may wind up making very different impressions on the players involved.”

“A month in advance?!” Emi exclaimed. “What the hell?! Why didn’t you tell me when I went back?!”

““Just a careless mistake,”” Ashiya and Suzuno shamelessly admitted.

“Chiho gave us her blessing last night,” Suzuno continued. “Just as with the

zirga, there is no personal danger or physical burden to risk. We could have taken her back home to Sasazuka, but there is no ignoring Chiho's school and test-prep-center obligations. Thus, in order to preserve Chiho's current life in Japan, Riho's cooperation is an indispensable part of the plan. I am glad to see our discussions have gone well. The Sasaki family is truly a virtuous one!"

"We got around half of the main cast gathered at Noza Quartus right now, so we really gotta get going soon..."

"The 'main cast' for *what*?! What're you gonna make Chiho do *this* time?! I need to go back to Japan for today! At least give me something concrete I can tell the Devil King about!" Emi's yells were still quite loud.

"Huh? Wait, Maou hasn't heard anything, either?" Urushihara asked.

"Oh? Did nobody run this past the Devil King? Wow. Betcha he's gonna be pretty pissed off again, huh?"

"Come to think of it... Bell!" Ashiya said.

"I, um, a lot of things happened, and, er, I failed to find quite the right timing..."

Kisaki, looking at Suzuno and the confused men staring at her, was completely lost—but with her business background, she knew what she was looking at here.

"A classic case study," Kisaki commented. "If a business fails at the core concepts of communication, contact, and discussion, it's easy for it to get tripped up with things like these."

"Whoa," Gabriel suddenly yelped, putting a hand to his ear. "Incoming from Laila. She says the Azure Emperor's arrived at Ea Quartus and he's headed for Noza Quartus right now. We really gotta get moving, or things are really gonna hit the fan, mm-kay?"

"I think you're right. Chiho, we can talk after we reach Noza Quartus," Ashiya said. "You as well, Ms. Sasaki. Here, Gabriel, can you take her mother for me?"

"You bet! Please, mademoiselle, take my hand."

"Huh? Um, okay."

“Wait, Gabriel! Alciel! Lucifer!” Emi prompted.

“Bell, you’ll be taking the MgRonald staff back for us, right? Can you give them the story on the way back?” Ashiya said.

“Ah... Yes, all right. No, the Devil King will *not* be happy about this...”

“...Try to reason with him.”

“Yes. I will.”

“Now, Ms. Sasaki, we must go!”

“Okay, Ashiya. Thanks a lot. Well... Ms. Kisasi! Ms. Iwaki! Kawacchi and Akiko! Sorry for all the grief I caused you today! I’ll make up for it once I get back!” Chiho said before departing.

“Hang on tight for me, mademoiselle? Ha-ha-ha!”

“All...right...”

And at the next moment, Lucifer, Ashiya, Chiho, and Riho were swallowed up by the Gate that Gabriel had opened. The MgRonald crew, watching a group of people vanish before their eyes, just stood there, frozen.

“Wait a second, Bell! That was a Gate, right?!” Emi shouted. “Is that safe right now?! Aren’t there Church knights at Noza Quartus?!”

“...They are safe for now. That is, until the day I complete my ritual and am ordained Archbishop.”

Suzuno looked up at the sky Chiho and the rest had disappeared to, whispering.

“Soon, we will launch Devil’s Castle. Whether the land around it turns into a sea of flame and destruction, or the stage for the biggest farce the world has ever known... It all depends on Chiho.”

“What do you *mean*?” Emi looked worried. “What are you gonna make her do? Because if it’s something dangerous, you really *will* piss the Devil King off.”

Suzuno shook her head, her expression reflecting her indefatigable confidence.

“If he is angered, I am ready to face the full brunt of it. Do not worry, Emilia.”

“...Bell? What’re you talking about?”

“...We had best return home. Ms. Kisasi and her team are going to freeze to death up here, and I am concerned about Acieth. For now, we all need to take a breather.”

As Suzuno took out her angel’s feather pen and assembled the crewmembers, Emi watched from behind her, a suspicious eyebrow raised. When she looked back at the city of Phiyenci, Adramelech’s ice spear seemed to be seated casually on the ground, enjoying a command view of the world spreading out after its owner’s death.

“Bell, please, can you at least tell me what Chiho’s doing before we return to Hatagaya? Otherwise, I won’t be able to back you up if the Devil King reacts funny.”

“No matter *how* he reacts, I am always on his side.”

“And I’d *also* like to know why you’re talking and acting so weird when it comes to him. Talk to me already! I’m getting so irritated!”

Emi kept pestering Suzuno. The way she seemed to smile a little whenever she mentioned Maou’s name grated on her mind. Then Suzuno, finally relenting, looked at the spear of ice.

“Tomorrow, Noza Quartus will be the site of a conference attended by Lady Dhin Dhem Wurs, Chief Rajid Rahs Rian, the Azure Emperor, General Hazel Rumack...and myself and Archbishop Cervantes Reberiz.”

“...What?”

For the *n*th time today, Emi was stunned into silence. This was, in essence, an international summit of all the world’s major leaders. Never had all these household names gathered in the same spot at the same time before. Even during the peak of the great war against the Devil King’s Army, the leaders generally stood back in the rear, mere background players compared to the Hero.

Even more unusual, though, was the presence of the Azure Emperor and Cervantes. That emperor was the first leader Ashiya had personally negotiated with, but unlike Wurs, he was never the type to venture into the front lines of

conflict himself—his Eight Great Scarves forces handled that. Here, his motives were a total unknown. And right now, it was safe to say that only heaven itself presented more of a threat to the Devil King's Army than Cervantes.

“Chiho will be serving as chairman of the conference.”

But beyond Emi's stunned silence lay nothing less than a total choke-out of her thought process.

“Nobody else can do that. It has to be Chiho. No one except her would be acceptable to all of the participants.”

“And..... And how does that connect to saving the world?”

Suzuno gave Emi a lonely smile. “They will discuss only one question at the event. The feat that the Hero Emilia engineered in the past shall take place once more, under the lead of Chiho.”

A suddenly strong gust of wind blew across the hill, taking up Emi's and Suzuno's hair. The sky—clouds hanging low over it, as they often did above Phiyenci—seemed like a mirror reflecting Emi's own heart. But within that gust, Suzuno's words rang true:

“They will be discussing the ‘Second Invasion’ of Devil's Castle.”

THE AUTHOR, THE AFTERWORD, AND YOU!

Everyone has one or two things they can't tell anyone else...but in terms of having *secrets*, I feel like not many people really have things that they must hide from everyone.

Look up “secret” in the Japanese dictionary, and one of the latter definitions you'll see is “the esoteric teachings left hidden by Buddha.” This is known as *mikkyo*, or esoteric Buddhism—and based on that, you can interpret a “secret” to mean something that, whether kept hidden or revealed, can impact however many people are located around the secret.

If you turn a person's life around and look over the whole of it, I feel like you won't find many things where it really mattered whether a person kept parts of their life a secret or revealed them. Generally, most things you'd want to hide are the regrets or underhanded dealings you engaged in during childhood or young adulthood. That, or more delicate things like your yearly salary or assets. Those things, however, don't really have much impact on the people around you—and as long as the secrets don't involve illegal or salacious matters, all revealing them does is change that person's view of it. It doesn't bother others too much.

In the end, the only thing you can really call a “secret” in one's day-to-day life is who's in a relationship with whom, I think. Within a set group, a couple forming can have a huge impact on the rest of its members. The fact that such couples are often kept secret until the right time, out of concern over that potential impact, has a lot of meaning, I feel. After it's revealed, the secret's fated to be judged based on whether its concealment was a good thing or not—and the revelation that a secret existed at all has just as large of an impact.

If you're looking for a secret bigger than that, I doubt you'll find one that directly affects your life as much. In a good way, that secret could be the members of your national team, announced in advance of an international sports championship. In a bad way, it could be a company covering something

up or a politician or bureaucrat's corrupt dealings—really huge stuff like that.

So, looking back on my own life, I, Wagahara, have been able to keep many secrets thanks to my readers. No, not about what the future holds for the story... I'm talking about my release dates.

Going forward, even though I have a plot in place, there are a lot of things that don't go according to plan once I actually start writing, so much of it remains an unknown to me. Not knowing, of course, doesn't count as a secret. Concealing a release date, however, has great meaning for obvious reason, whether it's kept secret or revealed for commercial reasons. The moment the release date becomes "TBD" and the author says, "Be patient and keep an eye out," the impact on the author and everyone around them is truly immeasurable.

So I've now gone on for quite a while about this inscrutable stuff, but what I'm *really* trying to say is that I'm sorry so much time has passed since the last volume was released. Getting *The Devil Is a Part Timer!*, Vol. 19 out, and getting to reveal just a few of the secrets behind the story, comes as a great relief to me. When is the next release date, and when will a few more secrets come out? I'd very much like to see it as soon—as *soon*—as possible. Right.

This is the story of people struggling to somehow face up to the secrets lurking in the subconscious of their daily lives. When they finally do, will the secrets be revealed, or concealed? I hope you'll want to see the conclusions each character comes to within the story world.

I'll see you all in the next volume! Until then!

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