
16
ICHIEI ISHIBUMI
ILLUSTRATION BY
Miyama-Zero
KAGAME
カガメトマトジュース
High School DxD
EXTRACURRICULAR DAYWALKER
PARENTAL ADVISORY
WARNING
EXPLICIT CONTENT


HIGH SCHOOL
DXD
16
EXTRACURRICULAR
DAYWALKER

[redacted]


Someone passed through the magic square on the ceiling and hit the floor with a loud thud. "Kyargh!" sounded a cute voice as she hit the ground.
It was Elmenhilde, rubbing her lower back after her failed landing.


HIGH SCHOOL
DXD



EXTRACURRICULAR DAYWALKER

16

ICHIEI ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY

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YEN ON

New York

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Volume 16
Ichiei Ishibumi

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Translation by Haydn Trowell

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Life.0

Over the summer, the Hyoudou residence was renovated into a grand mansion boasting six aboveground floors and three below.

Well, with so many rooms on each floor, there were still plenty to spare even with an increase in residents.

I, Issei Hyoudou, had unexpectedly found myself dragged into one of those vacant rooms!

It was nearly devoid of furnishings, with nothing but a laptop lying carelessly on the floor—and Xenovia stood imposingly in front of the computer.

I had come here at Asia's and Irina's insistence, but the moment I stepped inside, they slammed the door shut and locked me in.

Xenovia turned to me, paying no mind to Asia's and Irina's awkward looks. "Hey, Issei. I'm glad you're here. There's something I want to show you."

"Sh-show me…?" I asked back, my uncertainty writ large.

For some reason, her eyes were shining with an almost feverish intensity. I braced myself. Whenever she got that sort of look, you could bet she was about to stir up some kind of trouble.

With a nod, she produced the object she had hidden behind her back—a video game box.

"Yeah. I asked Kiryuu to get a new erotic video game."

The box featured a girl in a risqué pose! Yes, there could be no mistaking it—this was an *eroge*, an erotic video game!

Gleefully, Xenovia all but placed it in my hands. "It's called *Fallen Angel Nuns: Between Faith and Lust*! Like the name suggests, it's an *eroge* about debasing pious nuns! Honestly, it's no wonder Japanese people are so irreligious. Nuns are servants of God. They should be treated with respect," she said, staring at the game box with more than a hint of frustration…

I gazed back with exhaustion. "I—I get that… But why have you locked me in here? You're not saying you want us to play it together, are you…?"

It was hardly surprising I had come to this conclusion.

Not too long ago, Xenovia, Asia, and Irina had gone to Akihabara together to buy a certain *eroge* for me… Honestly, I had never been so embarrassed.

And when they got back—

"Hey, Issei. What's the meaning of this?"

"Oh dear. So you like this sort of thing, Issei?"

"Eeep…! Issei! I-is this something you want in real life?"

"Hmm, this could be instructive. Looks like it's filled with all sorts of baby-making techniques."

"I'm going to fall! At this rate, I'll plummet from Heaven into deepest darkness! B-but I *have* to watch!"

"…Very suggestive, isn't it? But there should be an alternative route. Right, once you clear it with a certain character, you might be able to unlock a new path…"

The girls were shy, but that didn't stop them from wanting to know what happened after you cleared all the game's routes and unlocked all the different endings.

Couldn't they see the problem here?! Erotic video games were supposed to be played by a man alone at night while he wore a secret grin on his face! Playing it with a legion of girls watching over my shoulder… That was worse than watching adult DVDs with your girlfriend!

W-well, not that I *hadn't* watched adult DVDs with my girlfriend… I mean, when Rias had discovered my secret stash, she'd insisted on watching them all… Yeah, that was rough.

I found myself reminiscing.

Xenovia, oblivious to what I was going through, nodded happily. "Way to go, Issei. You always get straight to the point. I was thinking you could play it while the three of us observe and ask questions. With President Rias away on business, I figured this was our chance!"

…I knew it.

I held my head in my hands. Why did they have to drag me into this?! At the very least, they could play it with me! Being asked to play while they watched my every move was the height of humiliation! I mean, come on! What sort of guy could actually sit down and play an erotic video game in front of a bunch of girls?! And to top it off, they would be asking my thoughts while I was playing?! Impossible!

Erotic games are meant to be a man's hidden sanctuary! Can't you just let me play it in peace?! my heart cried out.

Xenovia stared into the distance. "The three of us feel like we've been falling behind President Rias and Vice President Akeno lately. It's like there's a huge wall between us and them, like you're slipping further and further away, Issei. So we decided to team up and corner you! Isn't that right, Asia, Irina?"

"I—I…" Asia fidgeted nervously. "I'd be happy just talking…"

Irina's cheeks burned with embarrassment. "I—I was thinking it would be nice to reminisce on the old days over a cup of tea…"

Those two were as pure and innocent as ever. But Xenovia's voice went up a level in intensity!

"You're being too weak, you two! That's why we can't keep up with the others! Even Koneko and Ravel are pulling ahead of us! Koneko even came out with a reverse proposal, you know? And Ravel has made vows for the future with him! It seems like she's always by his side these days."

Right, I had found myself on the receiving end of a reverse proposal after the midlevel demon promotion exam… I attempted to put off the question by saying I wanted to wait until she got bigger first. She seemed satisfied enough with that answer, though…

If she grew up to be like her sister Kuroka…that would be pretty amazing!

As for my pledge with Ravel…it was to keep her on as my manager. That being said, I definitely did want to keep her by my side and look after her…

Xenovia was acting way more forward than usual today…

"It's definitely not wholesome, playing a naughty game with Issei…!" Irina said, turning to face her. "There are other ways we can

try to deepen our connection!"

Yep, yep! I was a hundred percent with her on that point!

"You say that, Irina," Xenovia said, a sinister glimmer in her eyes. "But I know the truth."

Irina swallowed hard. "Wh-what truth…?"

Xenovia flashed her a wry grin. "Heh-heh. I heard you've been asking around in Heaven…trying to find some way to cross the line with a demon without falling from grace. Apparently, Lord Michael is giving it serious thought."

All at once, Irina's ears turned bright red. "I—I—I…!" she stammered, her voice rising in pitch.

Had she actually asked Heaven about that? And was Archangel Michael himself really trying to come up with a solution?!

Asia was no less taken aback than I was. "Y-you're really thinking ahead, Irina! *Hah*… I didn't know *I* was the one lagging behind!"

"That's right, Asia," Xenovia continued. "Irina is already thinking about starting a family. We've all been working behind the scenes to improve ourselves. Take me, for example—I've been using *eroge* to improve my knowledge!"

At this, Asia's expression gave way to renewed determination. "I understand! I'll play and study some *eroge*, too! I won't lose to Rias, or to Akeno, or to either of you! I won't! Not to Koneko or Ravel, either!"

"That's the spirit, Asia. You've got an unyielding spirit," Xenovia said, delighted.

…Why couldn't I shake the feeling that something was seriously wrong here?! Was it really okay for high school girls to be caught up learning how to make babies by playing erotic video games?!

Xenovia turned her gaze back to Irina. "What about you? Are you just going to watch on with your fingers crossed? Are you just going to be his self-proclaimed friend forever? Kiryuu said nothing gets you closer to a guy than being his childhood friend, but if you're *too* close, it can keep you from moving forward. Heh-heh. Maybe that's your problem?"

The term *self-proclaimed* was off-limits for Irina, and she immediately broke out into an annoyed pout. "Ngh! It's always *self-*

proclaimed this, *self-proclaimed* that with you, Xenovia! Issei and I *are* childhood friends! And I *am* an angel!"

"Sure you are. A self-proclaimed childhood angel friend."

"Don't stick them together like that! Fine! I'll play the *eroge*! And I'll earn my place in Issei's heart as his childhood friend!"

Ah, even Irina was getting sucked in now.

Our Church Trio, nurtured as devoted members of God's flock from an early age, were out of their league when it came to earthly affairs. They always got caught up in things they didn't understand—which was what had helped them forge their unbreakable bond in the first place.

…Ever since Asia started hanging out with the other two, she had started shifting in a different direction. Frankly, it wasn't easy on me! Maybe I should say something… Just look what they were doing to my precious Asia!

At that moment, Xenovia started shedding her outer clothes.

"By the way, did you know?" she said to Asia and Irina after stripping down to a revealing bra. "Apparently, *eroge* are supposed to be played in the nude. I got that from Kiryuu."

—!

Just what was she teaching them?! Playing erotic videos games naked?! I mean, it wasn't like I hadn't heard of people doing that! Heck, there were even times I'd thought of trying it myself. But still!

For a girl to play one completely naked?! No! Let's not go there!

Asia was also taken aback. "But we didn't do that the last time we played together!"

"That was because we didn't have enough information," Xenovia answered. "It could explain why Issei wasn't really into it. After all, nudity is considered a virtue in Japanese culture."

No it wasn't!

"R-really…?!" Irina's voice trembled. "A-all right! If this is what it takes to get you to stop using that word, I'll take these off!"

Without even a moment's hesitation, she threw off her jacket and skirt!

"I like your style, Irina. You know how to take decisive action when it counts… What about you, Asia?" Xenovia asked as she

removed her bra, her voluptuous breasts jumping out.

"Haaah! I—I won't lose!"

Even Asia started undressing!

The three of them stripped off their clothes before my very eyes, as naked as the day they were born!

"Come on. You too, Issei."

In the blink of an eye, Xenovia closed the distance between us and started stripping me of my clothes! Thanks to her warrior nature, her movements were impossibly quick!

"N-nooo!" I wailed, screaming like a girl!

I mean, here I was, being stripped naked *by* a girl!

I clutched desperately to my underwear. "N-no, I don't want to play naked! I mean, I get it—but that's just what a guy does when he's on his own…!"

Irina held me down from behind, her soft, plump, angelic skin sending a soothing warmth through my entire body!

"We're not leaving you alone, Issei! We're staying right here with you!"

H-her plump breasts were pressing right up against my naked back! They were so utterly irresistible…! Irina! Where did you get such delightful, curvaceous breasts?!

Meanwhile, Asia was clinging snugly to my right arm! She was still growing, developing a distinctly feminine figure…! The softness and resilience of her breasts were becoming more and more pronounced!

"That's right! You can't play an *eroge* alone!" she insisted.

The two of them seated me on the floor in front of the laptop.

Xenovia wrapped her arms around me from behind, no doubt to prevent me from running away.

…H-her breasts were pressing right up against my back…! Like Irina, she was well-endowed—and I couldn't get enough of them! They were different to Irina's doughy texture, with a juicy resilience to them! A healthy mass of pure eroticism!

She reached out to take my hand, guiding it to the mouse. "All right, Issei. Can you handle the installation and all that?"

"A-ah, sure. I guess…"

I put the disk into the Blu-ray/DVD drive and let it install… It seemed to take forever for the bar to reach a hundred percent.

Asia and Irina were sitting snugly beside me, while Xenovia was all but glued to my back… I could feel her heartbeat though her chest, her breath on my neck, both sending an indescribable thrill coursing through me!

Once the installation was complete, I turned to the three of them. "It's done… It's ready to play."

"Let's get started, then," Xenovia said, peeking over my shoulder.

"You're really going to watch from there?!"

"Yep. It's a front-row seat… But, well… Hmm…"

She wore an ecstatic look as she rested her head on my shoulder. What a rare sight! Part of me didn't want to admit it, but she looked adorable!

"…Issei… It feels good, touching a man's skin. I wish we could do this every day. Right. From now on, let's meet here and do this naked after school. This could be a good way to wind down and restore our energy. No, better yet—you could hold me from the front next time. Yeah, I think that's where a woman's happiness really lies…"

R-really…? As a guy, I couldn't quite follow…

On hearing that, Irina grabbed my arm! "Then I'll try it, too…! Just enough so I don't fall from Heaven!"

And Asia was clinging to my other arm! "I wanted him to hug me first!"

Held down by the three of them, I couldn't even start playing the game!

W-well, it was hard to beat being embraced by all three of them naked, but the game had already started! This was getting out of control!

"Come on, you three! Do you want to watch me play or not?!" I cried at the top of my lungs.

I couldn't let Rias see me like this! Fortunately, she was off in Romania. Ah, Rias! My dear Rias! I'm so sorry! These three are all obsessed with erotic games!

I mean it! I'm so sorryyy!

As I sent my thoughts to her across the sea, the door suddenly swung open.

Appearing in the doorway was a girl with twin ponytails styled in vertical rolls—Ravel.

"Issei. You three. So this is where you were…"

She stared back at us, our four naked bodies intertwined, lost in the throes of an erotic video game. There was no excuse for this!

She stood there dumbfounded for a moment before quickly pulling herself together. "I—I'm late!"

Late?! She wanted to take part, too?! Cut me some slack!

With that, she paused to clear her throat. "No, now isn't the time. Azazel called… He says the situation over there has changed."

While we were busy with our eroticism and video games, *something* was underfoot in far-flung Romania…

Life.1

The Occult Research Club Goes to Romania!

The members of the Occult Research Club, along with Chairwoman Sona, Vice-Chairwoman Shinra, and our allies from Heaven—Sister Griselda and the Joker Dulio—gathered in the VIP room on the top floor of the Hyoudou residence.

Azazel was currently on a direct line from Romania, where he was visiting the stronghold of the Carmilla vampire clan.

No sooner did he inform us of the situation, appearing by holographic projection, than we recoiled in shock.

"Rias is in trouble?!" I shouted in alarm.

He nodded. *"Yeah. It seems there's been a major development with the Tsepesh. Both sides are panicking. It's safe to assume a coup has taken place, and there's a high chance Rias and Kiba have gotten caught up in it—or more likely, that they're being detained. I can't get through to her on my end. I'm guessing you guys can't, either?"*

"…"

Our breaths caught at the news. Akeno quickly opened a magic square for communicating with Rias, but there was no response…

"A coup…," Koneko murmured.

…A coup d'état, huh? Of all the times for it to happen, it had to be while Rias and Kiba were over there!

"…Ugh. N-no…" Gasper trailed off, his voice tense with worry.

This was his hometown we were talking about, so I could only imagine the turmoil brewing inside him. No doubt he was anxious to rush to his benefactor's aid.

Azazel wasn't finished. *"According to officials on the Carmilla side, the Tsepesh's top brass has changed hands in the coup."*

"—?!"

It was one shock after the next!

…Their leadership had changed?! After everything that had happened?!

"Th-this is a disaster!" I groaned.

Azazel breathed a tired sigh. *"Apparently, the head of the chauvinist Tsepesh clan has been evacuated from the capital."*

"…Their king? If he's fleeing, that's proof something big has happened." Akeno furrowed her brow.

Chairwoman Sona rested a hand on her chin. "Perhaps the Khaos Brigade is intervening in the Holy Grail situation…? I think it's safe to say the Tsepesh clan is being manipulated by them, at the very least."

We already knew there was a strong chance the Khaos Brigade, led by Euclid Lucifugus and in possession of deceased evil dragons, was connected to the Tsepesh clan by Longinus, the Holy Grail, capable of wielding power over the forces of life and death.

In other words, the Khaos Brigade must have brokered an agreement with the Tsepesh to use the Holy Grail. Azazel, Chairwoman Sona, and the leaders of the various allied forces were convinced that was how they had resurrected the evil dragons.

"Yeah, I'm sure the Khaos Brigade has been pulling the strings here. The Carmilla share that sentiment." Azazel breathed a tired sigh. *"Vampires—including the Tsepesh and the Carmilla—usually like to keep to themselves. They shun contact with outside forces and conduct their affairs internally. The Khaos Brigade must have found a way to infiltrate them. In any power structure, there's always a faction unhappy with the current regime. They must have found out about the Holy Grail and wormed their way in from behind the scenes."*

"So the Tsepesh's leaders didn't call for help even when they knew the Khaos Brigade was moving against them?" I asked.

They would have to be blind not to have noticed extremists plotting a takeover. They could have sought help well before the Khaos Brigade was in a position to overthrow their king. Yet they chose not to.

"…The Tsepesh are too damn proud. They're convinced they're

the ultimate beings, so they'd rather face death than seek outside help. Or maybe they wanted keep the Holy Grail under wraps over all else. Anyway, what's done is done. I'm worried about what's going on over there. I'm planning to head across from the Carmilla castle." Azazel's holographic projection looked us over. *"I'd like you all to join me, so get over here as quickly as you can. We should keep an eye on the Tsepesh while we link up with Rias and Kiba. We're gonna need your help this time. There are probably more people involved here than just the Tsepesh's anti-government rebels."*

It was finally happening! This was the moment I had been waiting for!

I slammed a fist into my left hand. "Of course! That's my job, protecting Rias! *Our* job, I mean! The Gremory Familia! No, the Occult Research Club! Right, everyone?"

"Naturally!" they shouted as one.

Helping Rias, our club president, was our number one priority! Besides, I was concerned about Azazel's suggestion that there might be more dangerous foes about.

"Still, we can't concentrate all our forces in one place. We've already been attacked once. It should be enough just to bring the Gremory Familia and Irina. The Sitri Familia, Griselda, the Joker, and Slash Dog should stay in town."

As he said, our hometown had recently fallen under attack. We had since established a stronger protective barrier to ensure it wouldn't happen again, and we were being extra vigilant about all comings and goings.

Azazel, it seemed, wasn't just worried about us. He wanted to make sure the Sitri Familia was okay as well.

"Understood," Sister Griselda said. "I apologize for asking this so soon after your arrival, Dulio, but I need you to focus on keeping the town safe."

Dulio raised a hand. "I could lock down the whole city of Tsepesh with some wild weather if I went with you, you know," he said with a slightly puzzled look.

I hadn't known this Slash Dog for very long, but he appeared to

be even more of an airhead than Irina.

His suggestion was out of the question—but for him, it was no joke. If ordered to, he could probably fly in and turn the entire vampire city into a block of ice…

Sister Griselda gave him a light tap on the back of the head. "Are you actively trying to worsen Heaven's relationship with vampirekind…?"

Yep, she sure was strict…

Azazel forced a smile. *"Both places are important. Given how many Longinus users are still out and about, we need to cover both bases."*

"—." My breath caught at how he had worded that.

"You don't think they've got any other Longinuses on their side, do you?" I asked.

Azazel nodded. *"Ah. Vali's also infiltrated the vampire realm. So we've got the Joker and Slash Dog and the Two Heavenly Dragons. Not the sort of treat a Sacred Gear maniac would want to pass up."*

…So Vali was over there? But why? Was it something to do with the Holy Grail? Or had he caught the whiff of an evil dragon? Knowing him, that was well within the realm of possibility.

At that moment, Chairwoman Sona raised a hand into the air. "This is a good opportunity. Members of the Gremory Familia, would you mind taking my two new recruits with you?"

"Bennia and Rugal, you mean?" I asked.

The chairwoman nodded. "Yes. They still lack combat experience. And I suspect their abilities may prove quite valuable, given the situation."

Ah, so she wanted them to grind for experience points? And she thought their abilities might come in handy? Bennia was a grim reaper, so that made sense, but Rugal's powers were still a mystery to us.

Azazel rested a hand on his chin before nodding in agreement. *"Yes, indeed. Rugal especially could be a real asset in a pinch. If you're willing to send them over, I'm sure they'd be more than welcome…"*

"Then we'll take them," I said.

And so Bennia and Rugal were officially in.

Azazel turned his gaze. *"You stay back, Ravel. You're a guest, and it wouldn't do for you to put yourself in harm's way. You may be Issei's manager, but he's probably going to run into terrorists over there. Do you understand?"*

"Yes." Ravel nodded. "I *am* worried about everyone, but I'll help look after the Hyoudou residence and Kuou Academy."

She was so well-behaved, truly. Not a word of complaint escaped her lips.

Ravel was incredibly supportive both to me personally and to the entire Occult Research Club, but she wasn't the sort of person who would fare well in a fight. And of course, we had a responsibility to look after her on behalf of the House of Phenex. We couldn't just drag her into certain danger.

…W-well, I did feel kind of guilty, though… I mean, it was my dragon powers that kept drawing us into all these situations…

Azazel looked us all over once more. *"I'll go over the details when you get here. As soon as you're ready, make the jump. I'll set up a teleportation square on the Carmilla side for you. Let's get going."*

"Right!" we answered as one.

And so, the Occult Research Club, along with Bennia and Rugal, would be heading to Romania. The others would remain on standby here.

Rias, Kiba! Stay safe until we get there!

Back in my room, I muttered under my breath, "A coup, huh? Honestly, why do we always have to get sucked into global incidents?"

After our meeting with Azazel, we split up to get ready to leave.

I was busy sorting my things, packing only the bare essentials.

But seriously, a coup…? Just when negotiations between our people and theirs started getting serious, the vampire side had to go through a violent change in leadership?

Trouble always seemed to find us… I couldn't shake the feeling I was intimately connected to whatever was going on over there…

I breathed a sigh. All at once, there came a knock at my door.

Peering inside—was Saji! I wasn't expecting to see him here.

"Oh, it's you. You came to see me off?"

"Yeah." He nodded, sitting himself on my desk chair with a concerned look. "A coup in the vampire territory, eh? Honestly. You never know what's going to happen next."

"I was thinking the same thing. And Rias and Kiba are caught in the middle of it."

"You wanted to know about Gasper's secret, right?"

"Yeah. Now probably isn't the right time, though, huh?"

According to Rias's last report, her negotiations with the Vladi family had been proceeding smoothly…

"What about you guys?" I asked. "And Bennia and Rugal?"

Now that the Sitri Familia had two new members, their team must have seen a good number of changes.

Saji propped his chin on the table. "We've settled on a new formation. But we're still working on something even more significant."

"Oh? Really?"

"I'm talking about the school the chairwoman's funding. We're set to officially break ground to start construction soon."

"School? The one for Rating Games? That's amazing! Any demon is supposed to be able to enter, right? Regardless of whether they're high-class or not?"

Indeed. The Sitri Familia's dream—or rather, Chairwoman Sona's dream—was to build a Rating Game school that anyone in the underworld could attend. And Saji had always wanted to be a teacher, so they were killing two birds with one stone.

"Yeah. The first one is nearly ready. We've managed to speed the project along a bit with Sairaorg's help."

So Sairaorg was working with the chairwoman…? Ah. If I remembered correctly, his mother getting treated at a hospital in the Sitri territory, so it made sense he was lending a hand.

"Other schools are still a long way off, though… But we've already started taking enrollments for students regardless of background or status, and there's even talk about accepting children with limited

demonic powers. We've even had parents bringing their kids along, asking for them to be admitted."

Saji was clearly overjoyed by it all, but I noticed a subtle lack of enthusiasm in his tone of voice.

He breathed a deep, conflicted sigh. "I told you my dream was to be a teacher in the underworld, right? But now that it's starting to become real, I'm getting scared. Will I actually be fit for the job once the school's up and running…? Apparently, you need to be at least midlevel before you can get a teaching license in the underworld. And I'm still a low-level demon…"

This wasn't the sort of half-hearted confession you would normally expect from Saji Genshirou, always going all out for the student council at school.

He rested his chin on the desk. "I don't even know *what* I should teach. Sairaorg's all fired up about teaching the kids martial arts and such… But I'm at a total loss…" Troubled, he stared down at his palms. "I've trained again and again with Longinus users…and I still can't even unlock my Balance Breaker…"

…Right. Heaven's Joker, Dulio, and Slash Dog Tobio Ikuse had offered to train with him at the earliest opportunity, but to no avail.

The two of them were even more formidable than their reputations suggested. I myself struggled against them. Seriously, if they went all out, it would be complete chaos. So we had decided to adjust our training regimen somewhat.

When I was training with Kiba, we could easily adjust the strength of our attacks so we didn't end up hurting each other. If we were going to keep training with the two newcomers, we would need to do something similar.

And of course, while Saji was part of the training session, he didn't have a Balance Breaker ability to draw on.

"You've only just started. There's no need to be pessimistic," I said, trying to encourage him.

I knew how tough it must be training with Longinus users, but the important thing was how he chose to face them.

Saji bowed his head. "Yeah, you're right… Sorry. I've just been in a bit of a rush lately. I know I probably keep focusing on the

negatives…”

I had heard from Chairwoman Sona how much all this was weighing on him.

“Saji is jealous of your progress, Issei. He can’t help but compare himself to you, and he’s losing confidence… His drive to be more like you might be slowly pushing him over the edge.”

…Saji. There’s no easy way to put it, but you have to take pride in your own strength. You have your own unique powers, after all.

I shook my head. “Don’t worry. I’ve found weaknesses in my own fighting style while practicing with those two. We’ve both got more to learn. And I’m glad to hear about the school.”

I was genuinely happy to hear the Sitri Familia was making progress.

“Right, you should come check it out with everyone sometime!” Saji said. “By then construction should be well underway.”

“I’m looking forward to it… I’ll bring everyone along.”

“So make sure you bring back Rias. And find out about Gasper’s secret, too.”

“Of course.”

The next moment, his eyes narrowed to thin slits, and he pointed an accusing finger at the object in my hand—an erotic magazine.

“…You won’t be needing that over there, will you?”

“Huh? I can’t live without it…”

I could take just one with me, couldn’t I?!

Those of us set to leave for Romania gathered in the huge magic square in the basement beneath the Hyoudou residence.

Meanwhile, Ravel, Chairwoman Sona, Saji, Sister Griselda, Kuroka, Le Fay, and Ophis came to see us off.

Once we made the jump, we would be in the territory of the vampire Carmilla clan. A teleportation square had been set up on the other side, sparing us the hassle of having to navigate a complex route to get there.

…To be honest, I wished they had done that from the very beginning. Rias, Kiba, and Azazel had been forced to go first by

airplane, then over land.

Then again, this was an emergency summons. The vampires must have felt a real sense of crisis to make this special exception for us.

We were dressed in our school uniforms, topped with winter jackets. It was apparently even colder over there than in Japan.

"We'd better get going, then," I said to everyone staying behind.

"Yes. We'll be waiting to hear word from you. Bennia, Rugal? Try to be of help. I'm counting on you," the chairwoman said.

"I think we're on the same page," the grim reaper answered.

"…Ah," Rugal added.

My manager, Ravel, stepped forward with a worried look. "Issei…"

"Don't worry, Ravel. We'll bring them back in one piece."

I tried to give her a gentle pat on the head, and yet—

"Did you bring a handkerchief and tissues? You might be asked to sign documents over there, so make sure you keep a pen handy at all times. Also, make sure you have breath mints and a toothbrush. For a celebrity, dental hygiene is everything! The Red Dragon Emperor has a tight schedule, so make good use of your time. And also…"

She was acting like my mom, showering me with instructions!

"Don't worry! I'll be fine! You worry too much, Ravel…"

Ha-ha. Well, this *was* just like her.

The next moment, she handed me a small package. "These just arrived—Phoenix Tears, from my brother. He said there are three inside. He sent them as soon as he heard you were going to Romania."

"Huh…? Riser…?"

…Hey, hey, hey. Shouldn't he have sent these to Rias? I mean, sure, she wasn't here right now…but it was addressed to *me*! Seriously, why were all my guy friends hell-bent on making me like them…?! Just give me a break, please!

I shook my head to clear my thoughts, then turned to Kuroka and Le Fay. "I'm counting on you to look after everyone here, you two."

"*Meow.* We'll protect the house at all costs."

"If you see Vali or my brother, be sure to give them my regards."

"Yeah." I nodded, then shifted my gaze to Ophis.

The Dragon God was wearing little Rassei perched on her head. "Evil dragons are stubborn, Issei."

…Ophis suspected we were going to run into one of them. To be honest, I had a gut feeling about that, too.

"I know," I answered.

And that was it. I went to rejoin the other members of the team in the teleportation square.

"The Occult Research Club is off to Romania!"

Akeno initiated the magic square—and a blinding light burst forth.

We were off! Maybe we could consider this an extracurricular adventure?

-○●○-

When the light subsided, we found ourselves in a vast, unfamiliar space.

"You made it," came a voice—and sure enough, there stood Azazel. "Sorry to rush you, but we've got to move," he said, approaching. "We can discuss the details in the car on the way. Elmenhilde will be our guide."

Emerging from the shadows behind him was the vampire girl who had visited Kuou Academy not too long ago. "Understood. I'm glad to see you've all made it here safely… We would have preferred to receive Gasper Vladi alone, but in any event…" Her tone contained more than a hint of annoyance. True to form, her words and demeanor were as thorny as ever. "I apologize for the haste, but please allow me to escort you to your vehicles," she added in a flat voice.

With that, we slipped out from the room with the teleportation square and started climbing a flight of stairs. We were apparently underground. The second we reached the top, a biting cold swept over us. Even in our winter gear, the chill was intense—the temperature was probably below zero. Finally, after passing through a stone corridor, we stepped outside.

It was night, with snow blanketing the ground all over.

So it was already snowing over here. I had heard that winters were harsher in Romania, despite the country sharing the same seasons as Japan. And of course, this vampire territory was nestled deep in remote mountains, so it made sense the temperatures were extremely low.

There was no sign of Elmenhilde's breath clouding in the cold weather. Maybe being a pure-blooded vampire, she was unaffected by the chill. Our little vampire, on the other hand…

"I-it's freezing…," he stammered, visibly trembling…

Was this one of the differences between pure-blooded and half-vampires?

"Wow…," Asia exclaimed.

Following her gaze, I laid eyes on the castle town sprawled out beneath us, buildings lining the streets clustered around a magnificent castle—and beyond, a stunning panorama of snowcapped mountains.

Whoa. I could hardly believe a town like this really existed. There were even a few modern buildings scattered about here and there. Like demons, vampires, it seemed, took inspiration from modern human culture.

"So this is the vampire stronghold, the one the Church has been trying to find for centuries," Xenovia murmured as she took it all in. "They couldn't even catch a whiff of this place back when I was a warrior with them. And here I am now, after becoming a demon. Pretty ironic, huh?"

Well, it just went to show how much things had changed between the various factions and mythologies.

It looked like we had come out from a watchtower on the edge of the town, no doubt designed to detect intrusions by outside threats.

After leaving the tower, we boarded a pair of wagons waiting for us, with Azazel and Rossweisse driving (Rossweisse, incidentally, was the only one of us with a driver's license).

"…I'll never understand demon sensibilities…"

I was surprised by the reactions of Elmenhilde and the other vampires when they laid eyes on Rugal—one and all, they wore

looks of revulsion and dread. What exactly *was* he…?

Nonetheless, we bade farewell to the Carmilla and set off while Azazel started filling us in on the situation.

"…! You're saying *Valerie* is the new Tsepesh leader?!" I gaped in disbelief.

Of course I was taken aback. It was one thing to hear the Tsepesh leadership had changed after a coup, but to learn their new queen was Gasper's old friend and savior?

"…V-Valerie…?" Gasper's dismay was intense. But it made sense. After all, the half-vampire childhood friend of his we were trying to save had somehow become the head of the rival clan. There was no way we could have seen that coming.

"The Tsepesh revere their male-line ancestors… To think that a half-blood vampire has seized power and a woman at that… There must be significant upheavals taking place," Akeno said.

That went without saying. A vampire clan as obsessed about purity of blood as they were would never choose a half-vampire as their queen. Elmenhilde had made that perfectly clear during our negotiations in Japan.

For the Tsepesh, there were pure-blooded vampires, and then there was everything else. That was all.

"The Khaos Brigade must have engineered this state of affairs," Azazel explained. "We know they've been colluding with anti-government groups within the Tsepesh clan. They probably wheedled their way in with promises of using the Holy Grail to *overcome weaknesses* or the like. They're the ones who have been pushing to unleash enhanced vampires against the Carmilla clan."

…In that case, the Tsepesh were probably in total disarray. Were Rias and Kiba going to be all right?

"Even the Tsepesh government couldn't deal with those extremist factions, leading them to seek help from the Carmilla. And for the Carmilla, having the Tsepesh owe them one was basically a dream come true." Azazel breathed a sigh. "Like I said in my messages, I had my own doubts about the Tsepesh, which was why I decided to tag along. But there's only so much I can do on my own. Part of the reason I asked you all here is because we need to rendezvous with

Rias and Kiba…" He paused for a second, running a hand through his hair. "Sorry about this, but it's going to be rough. We'll see how far we get with talking, but we're probably going to wind up in a fight. After all, the Carmilla side is involved in trying to quell this coup, and they've already identified their main targets to retaliate against. In fact, they've already deployed agents throughout the Tsepesh castle town. We're going to be diving right into the fray, so we'll need to gather intel once we get there, and depending on how things go, we might need to force our way through… And if that bastard is involved, there's a good chance it could all go sideways…"

…Well, part of me knew it would come to this. The way Azazel venomously referred to "that bastard" sure had me feeling unsettled, though…

I tried to force a smile. "We knew this was inevitable when you summoned us. We've basically got a one hundred percent chance of getting caught up in things like this… We came prepared."

The others nodded along in agreement.

Azazel flashed us a dauntless grin. "Seriously, I don't know if it's reassuring or concerning how used to this kind of thing you're all getting… All right, then. We'll rendezvous with Rias and Kiba, and if all goes well, we'll get Valerie out of there, too. The Tsepesh government and the Carmilla side can take care of the rest."

"…I'll save her…!" Gasper, seated next to me, had a piercing glint in his eyes.

"Don't put too much pressure on yourself," I said, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "We're all in this together."

"Issei… Right!"

Yep, he was well on the way to being a distinguished man of the Gremory Familia!

I was filled with joy to see how far he had grown. Meanwhile, the huge bridge connecting the Tsepesh and Carmilla territories came into view.

After nearly two hours, we arrived at a gondola station perched on a mountainside.

While we waited at the boarding area, a gondola lift slowly emerged from the snowy landscape.

Azazel addressed us once more as the door swung open. “I’m told this is one of the routes the Carmilla forces have seized. The castle town is at the other end of this gondola lift… It should let us pass through the barriers set up by the Tsepesh side.”

We stepped into the gondola, and off it set. Outside, the only thing we could see in the dark of night was an endless expanse of snow-covered peaks. Even with our enhanced demon vision, the scenery stretched on forever. But that was probably just an illusion. After all, the wards would be useless if they didn’t work against the likes of us.

While we waited, Xenovia’s strange behavior caught my eye.

She had pulled out a vocabulary notebook and was silently reviewing it.

“…Xenovia? What are you doing?” I asked.

“Hmm? Ah, this?” She showed me the page she was reading. “It’s just a vocab book. I’m trying to memorize these difficult Japanese kanji characters.”

She wasn’t kidding. The notebook was filled with words and kanji characters.

“Whoa. I didn’t know you were using a quiz book to study. Was the test that bad?”

“I’m not very good at Japanese, but I at least manage to score above average.”

Come to think of it, the members of the Occult Research Club always got impressive test scores. Even the battle-hardened Xenovia and Irina, though somewhat oblivious to the real world, had an easy time scoring highly.

Xenovia flipped through the vocabulary book. “I’ve found something I want to do. I need more knowledge, though, so I’m doing my best to remember all these characters.”

Something she wanted to do? And she needed to study more for it? I always thought she was somewhat naive, focusing on just getting her homework out of the way

Asia, seated on my other side, leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “She’s started to show an interest in school events… She says she wants to get the most out of her time as a student.”

Interesting. Come to think of it, she did seem to enjoy taking part in school events and had approached the Sports Festival and the Academy Festival with an infectious enthusiasm.

"Hee-hee. If you like, I can teach you some Japanese," Irina said, leaning in from farther away.

Xenovia, however, held out a hand in refusal. "No. Your knowledge of Japan is questionable at best. I'd be better off studying by myself or asking President Rias or Vice President Akeno for help."

"Wh-what gives?!" Irina pouted. "How rude!"

Xenovia breathed a sigh. "Just the other day, you got one of those kanji compound proverbs completely wrong. *The weak are meat, the strong eat* doesn't mean both weak and strong are equally entitled to eat roasted meat. It's *survival of the fittest*. Seriously, there are similar sayings all over the world, and you still messed it up…"

Th-that was an embarrassing blunder. Irina often made mistakes, probably because she had a misguided view of all things Japan.

Her eyes spun as she fumbled for words. "Ugh… I—I just mixed it up with an advertisement parody from a grilled meat restaurant!"

"…Says the girl who claims she was *raised in Japan*… I'm amazed you made it this far."

Irina's eyes flooded with tears, her cheeks puffing out in indignation. "I—I'm not *claiming* anything! I *was* born and raised in Japan!"

"Sure, sure. Whatever you say. I'll take the grilled meat set."

"Waaah! Xenovia's bullying me, Asia!" Irina wailed.

"U-um… Why don't we study together next time?"

"What?! Not you, too, Asia?!" Irina was left even more shocked by Asia's natural response.

Ha-ha… In its own way, this kind of bickering was kind of heartwarming.

With that, I turned to Akeno, chuckling a short distance away. "By the way, Akeno, did you know construction has started on the Sitri school?"

"Yes. I heard from Chairwoman Sona."

Well, that was only natural.

"I heard about that," Rossweisse said, entering the conversation. "The chairwoman even offered me a future position there."

—! Whoa, an offer for a teaching position?!

"Seriously?! I—I had no idea…"

Then again, it did make sense. Rossweisse was a highly skilled magic user. It wasn't at all surprising the chairwoman would want her to teach at the new school.

"What did you say?" I asked.

Rossweisse broke into a troubled frown. "I'm still thinking it over. I don't have any particular reason to turn her down. Teaching at Kuou Academy has made me realize how rewarding education can be. I'm planning to visit the new school when it's ready. If all this vampire business can be resolved peacefully, that is…"

Right. We had to deal with the incident at hand before worrying about the new Sitri school.

"In that case, let's all go visit it once we're safely back in Japan," I suggested.

"I'd like that," Rossweisse answered with a warm smile.

Azazel hadn't said anything, despite the fact he usually liked to chime in on these kinds of conversations. He was busy talking with Bennia and Rugal, the three of them staring out the window.

"…I see. So the netherworld…"

"Well, that's what my stupid old man and Lord Hades are thinking…"

"…So what's the situation with your people, Rugal?"

"…I haven't heard of anyone trying to capitalize on this latest frenzy. I think the tribe has decided to stay out of it for now."

"Right. That sounds like them…"

Hmm. I wanted to know what they were all talking about, but if I jumped in now, they would probably have to repeat everything just to catch me up.

I could ask Azazel about it later. Hopefully. So long as the situation with the Tsepesh vampires didn't spiral out of control…

In the end, we each tried to relax in our own way before entering hostile vampire territory.

After thirty minutes crossing several mountains in the swaying gondola lift, we arrived at the station near the Tsepesh castle town.

No sooner did the gondola come to a stop than a group of vampires came out to greet us.

"Former Governor Azazel? And you must be the Gremory Familia? We're from the Tsepesh clan."

We nodded in silent response. Had they known we were coming? Well, it wasn't like we were going to great efforts to sneak in.

"Please, this way," their leader said, adopting a rather gentlemanly demeanor. "Rias Gremory is waiting for you at the main Tsepesh castle."

I was surprised at how smoothly everything was proceeding despite the city having just seen a coup d'état.

So Rias was at their main fortress? I thought she was staying with the Vladi family…? Was she being held captive?

Why were they taking us there…? Because of Azazel's deep knowledge of Sacred Gears? Or else…

With no time to ponder, we were taken to a lavishly adorned carriage waiting outside the gondola station—perhaps meant for noble guests?

In other words, it was from the main fortress—which was no doubt where we were being taken.

…Only then did I notice that Bennia and Rugal were nowhere to be seen. I glanced around, when Akeno leaned close to whisper in my ear. "They're going a different way—to investigate the city, it seems. We need to secure an escape route in case of an emergency."

Seriously? They had vanished without even making a sound! And the Tsepesh hadn't noticed them go, either…?

The vampires, puzzled by the sudden mismatch in our numbers, voiced a hurried report to their superiors. Yet in their haste to be off, they urged us to board the carriage.

We nodded in agreement as we stepped inside.

…Rias, Kiba? We'll be there soon.

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The view of the town from the carriage window didn't change much on the way to the castle—residents were out and about, the streets so calm you wouldn't believe a coup d'état had just taken place.

I thought we might find signs of violence or destruction…but everything seemed normal.

"The architects of the coup probably pulled it off with minimal action," Azazel remarked, as if reading my mind. "The populace might not even know what's happened. If that's the case, the rebels must have made arrangements with the bureaucrats administering the city… They might have offered use of the Holy Grail to those who worked with them."

…Was he saying the coup had been executed without the public knowing? And the king and his inner circle had been forced to retreat just like that?

…There would have to be a lot of traitors on the inside, then. It was hard to believe it could have been carried out so smoothly otherwise. Even a high schooler like me knew that much.

The carriage made its way through the town, up to the main gate in the wall surrounding the fortress.

Inside, the fortress was just as large in scale as the Gremory castle. It was an old-fashioned stone structure, exuding a strange, otherworldly aura quite different to what I had encountered in the underworld.

After disembarking, we were led straight inside, all the way to a set of grandiose double doors covered with impressive reliefs of all sorts of monsters. The throne room, no doubt, lay ahead.

"Please wait here," the butler who greeted our party said before vanishing.

After a few minutes of waiting, a familiar voice rang out. "Issei! Everyone!"

I spun around—and there stood Rias, accompanied by a maid! And Kiba was standing behind her!

"Rias! Are you okay?"

I rushed over, and she gave me a smile and a nod.

Ah, she was as beautiful as always! Thank goodness nothing had happened to her!

"Yes, somehow… I see you noticed a coup had taken place here, Azazel."

This time, it was Azazel's turn to nod. "Yeah. I had a feeling something was up, so I called everyone over. No complaints on your part, I hope?" he asked.

"No. I was trying to find a way to call everyone, but we've been confined to the castle, unable to get word out. The queen herself invited me to an audience, but I haven't been able to see her until now… A few minutes ago, I was told guests had arrived, and here you are."

So they were both fine during the coup?

I turned to Kiba. "Nothing happened?"

He gave his shoulders a slight shrug. "I'm just as surprised as you are that we weren't caught in the fallout. I think they were too busy with their internal conflict to worry about us. Until now, at least." With that, he cast his gaze at the towering double doors.

…So the Tsepesh leaders would see us now that we were all here?

The solders standing by either side of the doors, clad in armor and swords like relics from a bygone era, gave us permission to enter. "The queen will now grant you an audience."

With that, the massive double doors swung open with a deep, heavy reverberation.

Azazel went in first, followed by Rias, and then the rest of us.

A vast interior. Before us lay a sprawling bright red carpet, embroidered in golden monsters of the same design as the reliefs on the door.

And at the end of the carpet, on an elevated platform, was the throne.

Sitting atop it was a young woman, while a young man was likewise seated a short distance away. The man had a beautiful, doll-like face, but there was something unsettling, almost unlifelike about his features. Maybe that was because he was a pure-blooded vampire?

Apart from the woman on the throne, the man seated near her, a few soldiers, and several nobles in their medieval finery, the throne

room was surprisingly empty.

…I was expecting a crowd of onlookers, but it was astonishingly quiet…

Right. No wonder the coup had gone off so smoothly. They were already well entrenched. The plotters must have been laying the groundwork for quite a while.

…No doubt the Khaos Brigade lent a helping hand. But all the same, it was hard to believe they got so far without anyone noticing.

Perhaps it was precisely because this vampire stronghold was isolated from the other forces that the plot been so successful.

Disgusted though I was by the terrorist organization, I made sure to stand up straight as we reached the throne looming before us.

The woman seated on it had golden-blond hair tied in a neat braid, and her dress exuded simplicity more than it did extravagance. She had a gentle smile on her face.

If I had to guess, she looked around three years older than me. Her features were striking, undeniably beautiful. Unlike Elmenhilde's doll-like beauty, hers was bolstered by a certain human warmth.

…She was probably a half-blood, embodying the beauty of both her vampire and human heritages.

However… If she really were a gorgeous beauty, I very well might have gone full lecher. And yet…

Her crimson eyes—were vacant. It was as if they had lost their luster…

"Greetings to you all," she said, watching us with her hollow gaze. "My name is Valerie Tsepesh."

The smile on her face… It oozed fragility and pain.

"Ah, um. I suppose I should introduce myself as the current head of the House of Tsepesh—its queen. Be welcome."

…Her voice was light and airy… But her gaze remained hazy, like it was unable to focus. The only exception was when she caught sight of a familiar face.

"Gasper—you've grown."

Gasper wore a look of profound sorrow, though he forced himself to smile. "Valerie… I've missed you."

"And I you. I've missed you so much. Come a little closer, would

you?” She beckoned.

Gasper approached, neither the soldiers nor the nearby vampires doing anything to stop him.

When he was within reach, Valerie pulled him close. “I’m glad to see you look well…,” she whispered.

“Yes. I’m a demon now…but I’m doing fine.”

“I heard. I’m told they’re taking good care of you.”

“Yes. I’ve made friends. I’m not alone anymore,” he said, turning around to look back at us.

Valerie likewise glanced our way. “Ah… So you’re Gasper’s friends…? Oh?”

All at once, her head turned in the wrong direction.

“———. ———.”

Without warning, she spoke in a language I had never heard before, an eerie susurrus echoing through the hall.

…Having been reincarnated as a demon, I was supposed to be able to speak and understand all languages. Nonetheless, those words were incomprehensible—like a tongue that didn’t belong to this world.

The others broke into stern frowns. Like me, they probably couldn’t understand her, either.

Then, all at once, Valerie’s face lit up. “Yes. Yes, I agree. Huh…? But that’s… ———. ———. Really? Yes… ———.”

Gasper was as confused as the rest of us as Valerie continued to address the empty space.

“…Don’t face that thing head-on, you hear?” Azazel murmured under his breath. “The Holy Grail will draw you in. Especially you, Asia, Xenovia, Irina. Coming from the Church, you’d better not look at it directly.”

Whether they understood the full implications of his warning or not, the three of them averted their gaze.

“What is it…?” I asked Azazel.

“…That’s what happens once you’ve been possessed by the Holy Grail. You start seeing things no one’s supposed to see. I’ll explain more later.”

A sharp clap echoed through the air—coming from the young

vampire man seated close to Valerie. "It's impolite to be talking to *them* right now, wouldn't you agree? If you are to be queen, you must conduct yourself as such."

"Apologies," Valerie answered with a soft smile. Her eyes remained just as hollow as before. "Oh-ho. Forgive me. But as your queen, I can make vampire society a peaceful one. Isn't that exciting? Gasper will be able to live here, too. No one will bully us anymore, I promise."

…It was clear as day those words didn't reflect her true feelings. She was being deceived, manipulated.

…The architects of the coup were no doubt controlling her. Both her heart and her Sacred Gear…

"…Valerie…" Gasper wept, brought to tears to see her in this state.

Azazel fixed the young vampire man with a piercing glare. "You've gone to considerable lengths to get to this point, haven't you? And you're so brazen about it. What do you want with her? From what I can see, you're the puppet master here, aren't you?"

The man's handsome, doll-like features twisted into a grotesque smile. "You might say I'm the ringleader, yes. Oh, but that reminds me. I haven't introduced myself. I am Marius Tsepesh, fifth in line to the Tsepesh throne. I currently serve as prime minister of the provisional government as well as chief adviser on Sacred Gears. Though I must admit, my expertise lies more in the latter area… My uncles asked me to take on the role of prime minister temporarily. I am also Valerie's brother, and I wish to closely observe how my dear sister plans to transform the vampire world as our queen," he said in a flippant, carefree tone.

So he was royalty, huh?

His cold smile hinted at deep-rooted malice. His remarks about Valerie were a blatant lie.

"…You know we've been in contact with the Carmilla vampires, right?" Azazel said. "And you still decided to invite us in?"

Marius gave an exaggerated shrug. "The new government wishes to engage in amicable diplomacy, whether it be with the Carmilla or with the governor of the fallen angels. At least, that's our new

slogan. It's half in jest, really. To tell you the truth, I'm not particularly interested in politicking. I'll leave that to the others. No, Valerie expressed a desire to meet you, and I was curious about you all myself. After all, our friends often whisper your names."

"Let's put that aside for now… So if you're the ringleader, here's a question for you—what's the ultimate goal of this coup? Was it *his* idea?"

Without warning, Azazel, as relentless as ever, cut to the heart of the matter, sending the Tsepesh vampires into hushed murmurs…

"I'm simply trying to create an environment where I can do as I wish with the Holy Grail," Marius answered nonchalantly. "Valerie's Sacred Gear is a fascinating thing, and we've been running all sorts of experiments. Yes, that really is all there is to it. The former kings—my father and elder brothers—stood in the way, so I pushed them aside. As for *him*…*we* initiated that relationship."

…

…What the hell?

This country was falling apart all because of this guy's selfish whims…?!

Even after hearing all that, Valerie maintained a perfect smile… Just how thoroughly were they controlling her?

Marius's remarks, however, did leave the other vampires in a stir.

"Prince Marius! This is neither the time nor the place for such discussions!"

"Th-this is the royal audience chamber! You may be interim prime minister, but I must ask you to show a little more decorum!"

"You're addressing the former governor of the Grigori and the heir to the House of Gremory. You will compromise our position if they take your words to be our shared consensus!"

The noblemen in their aristocratic attire, supposedly Marius's coconspirators, rushed to chastise him.

"Dear me," he quipped with a sarcastic grin. "Perhaps I should be stripped of my position as prime minister?"

Talk about an attitude. And to think, the people around him didn't seem capable of stopping him. It was probably safe to say he was pulling all the strings, then.

I was seething with rage. My friends were just as incensed, fixing him with baleful glares.

"…He's awful. Terrible," Asia murmured, weeping to hear the truth of the situation.

"…You're saying you can't release Valerie Tsepesh, I take it?" Rias asked.

"Of course not," Marius answered simply.

"Talk is useless here, Prez," Xenovia said, her expression as cold as ice as she reached to pull the Durendal from its subspace fold. "Let's be rid of him and get the hell out of here. So long as he lives, we're in danger."

Xenovia harbored no fondness for vampires, her hatred erupting in full force at Marius's casual cruelty.

"Stop, Xenovia…! He's their prime minister," Rias admonished her.

Marius watched on with an unconcerned smile as Xenovia drew her Holy Sword. "Oh, scary. Then shall I introduce you to my bodyguard? He's part of the reason I can afford to be so bold."

He snapped his fingers—and in that instant, a sudden chill swept over us!

—?!

Just like that, every pore in my body opened wide as a frigid air passed through my flesh.

It was like being targeted by an immense, powerful predator, my senses alerting me to the precariousness of my situation.

And it wasn't just me—every member of the Occult Research Club wore tense looks as they focused their gazes on a single point.

I followed suit—and laid eyes on a tall man in a black coat, leaning against a pillar.

His hair was a mix of alternating streaks, as were his eyes—the left gold, the right black. He took one look our way, then shifted his attention to the floor in front of us.

"…He's on a whole other level compared to us," Kiba said, visibly apprehensive. "I don't think he's a vampire, though…"

He felt it, too? Not good. If anyone's presence dominated the throne room right now, it was that man's.

His quiet aura suggested depths that ought to have been

impossible to achieve.

…Having fought so many formidable opponents myself, I knew it at first glance—this person, whoever he was, was a monster.

Xenovia had to wipe the sweat from her cheeks. "If *he* was part of the coup, it's no wonder they won. The vampires we've seen wouldn't be able to stand up to that."

We held ourselves back, overcome with dread—when Ddraig spoke to me from within: *"The gulf between you and him is too vast. There's no way you can handle him at the moment."*

…You know this guy, Ddraig?

"Yes. He's taken human form, but there's no mistaking him. He's the Crescent Circle Dragon, Crom Cruach—the most powerful of evil dragons."

—?!

…Seriously? No way… The strongest evil dragon? Crom Cruach…?!

My breath caught in my throat. Grendel was bad enough, but the aura this evil dragon exuded was even more dangerous than that insane monster…!

"Don't do it. With how far you've grown, I thought you could take on just about any enemy… But he's different."

…Just so we're clear, does he know who we are?

"That you're the Red Dragon Emperor? He must."

…Talk about scary. I could only hope I didn't have to fight him down the road.

But how was I supposed to let everyone else know who he was…?

Marius clapped his hands once more. "I think that's enough for today. We've prepared rooms for you, so feel free to stay a while longer. Oh yes, I almost forgot. The head of the Vladi family is currently staying in the castle's basement. It would be well worth dropping in."

With the audience finished, we were forced to back out of the audience chamber.

Marius Tsepesh… In just a few minutes, he had revealed himself not only as the mastermind behind the coup but as a truly

dangerous adversary.

Watching the man in black—Crom Cruach—from the corner of our eyes, we made our exit.

After leaving the royal audience chamber, we were led to the chambers prepared for us ahead of time.

"…For a vampire, he's one hell of a heretic," Azazel, visibly sullen ever since the exchange with Marius, muttered under his breath.

Rias nodded. "Yes. There aren't many vampires who would act on pure self-interest. They tend to prioritize pride or lineage."

Right. Marius was clearly a very different vampire than the likes of Elmenhilde. I had only seen him once, but I could tell from his attitude and demeanor that he was incredibly forthright about his desires.

Azazel narrowed his eyes. "That's what makes this such a pain. He won't hesitate to break his own people's rules. He no doubt put the coup in motion, while the other nobles we saw jumped on the bandwagon. He would have needed collaborators to get what he wanted, and the politicians would have found a way to act on their dissatisfaction with the old government while at the same time gaining power through the Holy Grail. Bringing those evil dragons back from the dead would have certainly helped topple the old king, while the country's isolation made it possible for the terrorists and corrupt politicians to act before anyone caught on."

…So we were dealing with a domestic upheaval in a country that had no diplomatic relations with the outside world, and to make matters worse, terrorists were involved. Naturally, we were caught up in the middle of it all… Ugh! This was turning into a huge headache!

"Where *is* the ousted Tsepesh king?" I asked Rias as we made our way down the hallway.

I couldn't help but wonder what happened to Marius's father.

"…I heard he suffered grievous injuries and was evacuated from the Tsepesh territory."

So he was injured? That was certainly a dramatic turn of events.

But there probably wasn't much he could have done against that vicious evil dragon. I didn't know how strong the Tsepesh king was, but faced with a foe like that, escape was probably his only real option.

"Is it true the Tsepesh king hasn't turned to anyone else for help other than the Carmilla vampires?" I asked.

Azazel breathed a tired sigh. "I suspect so. With the Khaos Brigade involved, it's inevitable that other forces are going to want to intervene, but we haven't heard anything so far. We're trying to negotiate, though, and we were granted a special exception to travel here."

Even after being ousted in a violent uprising, they didn't want help from non-vampires… As far as I was concerned, their excessive pride was beyond comprehension.

I decided to ask Azazel something that had been bothering me during the audience—the fact that Valerie had been speaking to thin air.

"…Who exactly *was* she talking to?"

"…Departed souls," he answered with a stern look.

Departed souls…?

"You mean the souls of people in the underworld, or the realm of the dead?"

For some reason, the only things that came to mind were vengeful spirits and malevolent entities and the like…

"Some of them may be human but not all of them…," Azazel answered. "There's no telling what they are anymore."

"I—I don't really follow…"

"Just think of it as talking to something you don't understand… Overuse of the Holy Grail can lead to a kind of mental degradation."

Mental degradation? Ah… Her eyes weren't right, that was for sure.

"I sensed it as soon as we entered the room," Rias said with a nod. "Valerie Tsepesh's heart and mind aren't all there, I'm afraid."

Yeah. Her eyes had been vacant, her expressions somehow off.

"…What happened to her…?" Gasper asked, his expression darkening.

He was the one most affected by all this. He had been on the verge of tears ever since we first saw her.

Not too long ago, he would have been crying inconsolably.

"…The Holy Grail," Azazel murmured. "The closer you touch on the principles of life and death, the more you're forced to learn their ultimate nature, to know their *making*. The volume of information there is to learn is infinitely vast, and each time you make use of the Holy Grail, you take in the spirits and knowledge of countless beings, both living and dead… Try to imagine other consciousnesses flooding in, eroding your own sense of self… It's no wonder its users are left broken."

…Other beings flooding into your soul… I had felt my mind unraveling when I first faced the lingering resentment of previous Red Dragon Emperors. The blackest of emotions very nearly took me over.

But Valerie had been forced to endure something even more intense, again and again? For me, it was just the residual thoughts of past Red Dragon Emperors, but in her case, it went far beyond that…

"So she's…?" Rossweisse trailed off.

"Not in a good way, no." Azazel sighed. "Being able to hear the dead speaking to you is just one part of it. By the time you start actually communicating with them, the mental degradation has crossed into fatal territory. Marius has been using the Holy Grail unrestrained, even resurrecting those evil dragons. He's abused its power."

…Fatal? Both Grendel and Crom Cruach had been resurrected, neither of which could have been an easy feat. It was little wonder her mind had broken under the pressure.

But all the same, Gasper had come all this way to save her. He had to explore every possible option.

"There's no way to help her, Teach?" I asked.

He rested his chin on a hand, deep in thought. "First, we have to address the Holy Grail itself. We could—"

With that, he suddenly fell silent.

Why? Because someone was approaching us.

…A silver-haired, middle-aged man, probably in his mid-forties, had appeared at the far end of the corridor.

—.

…When I—when *we* saw what he was wearing, we were rendered utterly speechless.

It was the same type of regalia as the Demon King Sirzechs Lucifer.

His, however, had silver highlights rather than crimson… His face struck a chord in my memory…

From his aura, it was clear he was a demon… Though he did have an incredibly off-putting presence…

Azazel stared back wide-eyed, raw disgust plastered across his face.

As soon as the man was close enough, he flashed us an innocent grin. "Eh? Well, ain't this a crazy coincidence?" he said in the most casual tone imaginable.

"…I knew it…!" Azazel growled as if vomiting up something.

The man couldn't have been any more pleased by that response. "Ha-ha-ha! Long time no see, Azazel, my man! Looking all fresh and hype, huh?"

…He looked older than Azazel…but then again, being a demon, he could probably change his appearance however he pleased.

"…Azazel? Who is this?" Rias, it seemed, didn't recognize him, either.

"…Rizevim. Your parents must have mentioned him, right? Any Gremory ought to know that name."

That was enough to make Rias tense up like never before. "—! It can't be… No…" She was so taken aback that there was an audible tremor to her voice.

…Who on earth was this Rizevim?

Aside from Azazel and Rias, no one else present seemed to know who he was.

"…I'll never forget his damn face," Azazel began to explain. "Hey, Lilin? No—Rizevim Livan Lucifer?"

—?!

L-L-Lucifer?!

Wait, hold on a second! Lucifer?! Why was the Demon King's name being brought up all of a sudden?! Sirzechs was the only one allowed to call himself that…

My mind wandered through the possibilities, until—

Right. There *was* one other person who could legitimately use that name.

The man—Rizevim Livan Lucifer—twisted his lips in a smirk. "Come on—don't go making faces. You're gonna get wrinkles."

…He still wasn't dropping that frivolous tone.

I turned to Azazel. I had to know if my hunch was true. "Did you just say Lucifer, Teach…?"

"Yeah. He's the real thing, the son of Lilith, the mother of demons, and the last Lucifer before Sirzechs. He's the Lilin from the bible. Vali's the most powerful White Dragon Emperor there's ever been, and this guy is his grandfather."

—! So he was Vali's grandfather…?!

And not only that, he was the son of the original Lucifer?!

Right. I had never thought about it before, but if Vali was descended from the original Lucifer, there had to be other people in his family tree. He didn't come from nothing, after all. He liked to boast about being the great-grandson of the original Lucifer, so the lineage must have gone Lucifer, then this guy here, then Vali's father, then Vali himself.

Obviously, the guy would have blood relatives. Sure enough, when I heard the name, it was Sirzechs and Vali who came to mind.

The man's silver hair was the exact same hue as Vali's, and there was an unmistakable similarity in his features. But to think, this was actually him…?

What in the world was he doing here? It was one mystery after another.

"He's also the Khaos Brigade's new leader," Azazel continued. "This is *him*, the guy I've been referring to."

"—?!"

We were all left speechless with shock! Naturally!

S-so this old guy…was the new leader of the Khaos Brigade…?!

W-wait, so the new boss Euclid mentioned—he was talking about

Vali's grandfather?!

…We already knew the Khaos Brigade had secretly aided the coup here, so it probably wasn't all that surprising we had bumped into him…

No, hold on… Vali's grandfather, the son of the original Lucifer, was leading the Khaos Brigade? Sure, I knew the old Demon King regime was part of their group, but still…

So was he motivated by a thirst for revenge, like Shalba Beelzebub had been…?

There was no end to my questions.

"In the past, when the old Demon Kings still ruled the underworld, Rizevim Livan Lucifer was considered a *super demon*, the same as my brother Sirzechs Gremory and Ajuka Astaroth," Rias whispered.

…A super demon. I had heard from Azazel there had only been three such demons over the course of history, each of them possessing abilities so vastly superior to all others that it was debatable whether they could be considered demons at all. In the present era, only Sirzechs and Ajuka Beelzebub were supposed to still be active.

I heard one of the three super demons had disappeared…and this was him?!

"After he disappeared, the other two super demons—Sirzechs and Ajuka—climbed up in rank. Well, not like Rizevim was ever going to stick around, being a key player in the old Demon King regime. Not when Sirzechs and Ajuka wanted peace before all else."

Right. Peace clearly wasn't a high priority for him, becoming a terrorist leader and all…

"He disappeared during the civil war between the old Demon King government and the rebel forces…," Azazel continued. "And now he's back. Something tells me he isn't driven by hatred and resentment, like those old Demon King stragglers were…"

Rizevim broke into a fit of laughter. "Ha-ha-ha! I'm back because I finally got to do what I'd been wanting to. What about you, Azazel, my man? I heard you've been hustling trying to broker peace with all the powers. Me, I'm all for that!"

Enough with that flippant tone! Every word that came out of his mouth was filled with impudence and an undercurrent of malice.

Seriously, the way he was talking was throwing me off even more than his appearance!

Rizevim's gaze shifted to Rias. "Yo, redhead girl. How's your brother doing?"

"…Are you hinting at something?"

"It's not like I can say no, huh? We're both going about calling ourselves Lucifer, right? But honestly, it doesn't matter to me all that much. I've got a feeling we're gonna cross paths sooner or later, so just give him a heads-up for me, all right?"

"…!" Rias furrowed her brow in annoyance.

Only then did Rizevim seem to finally realize we were all bracing ourselves for a fight, though he made no move to reciprocate. Rather, he broke out into another round of laughter. "Look, I ain't like Shalba or them other ex–Demon King fams with their hate and grudges. As far as demon politics go, I think Sirzechs and crew have that covered. I'm just using this organization to pursue my own goals, all right?"

Azazel glared back at him, veins throbbing around his temples. "I'd beat you up where you stand… But this is a neutral country, and those vampires aren't officially with us yet. I can't just rush in and start a fight, can I? Besides, I'm guessing you're here undercover, being feted like some VIP?"

Rizevim let out an obnoxious guffaw. "Ha-ha-ha! You got it! I'm the big boss behind Marius's research and that revolution he's pushing. Right now, I'm sitting pretty with this provisional government, like a state guest. Messing with me ain't a smart move, you know? Not that I'd lose to you."

—! Without warning, a small silhouette appeared behind him.

…It was a girl in a black dress… No, hold on!

"…Seriously?"

My breath caught in my throat.

She looked just like Ophis.

Rizevim placed a hand on her head. "This is my crew's mascot, Lilith, made from the powers we stole from Ophis. Ain't she dope? I

gave her my ma's name. Pretty neat, huh?"

…I knew it! She was made from powers Cao Cao took using Samael's abilities! To think, the Khaos Brigade had turned them into a living girl!

"…"

She was silent and expressionless, even more so than Ophis herself—completely unreadable.

"She may be small but don't be fooled—she's one tough cookie! She's like my personal bodyguard, you know? She's the one who's got my back while my main guy, Euclid, is away. There's something romantic about a tiny little fighter packing a huge punch, don'cha think?"

The girl emanated an overpowering, awe-inspiring sense of presence, much like Crom Cruach earlier.

…The most powerful evil dragon, the son of the original Lucifer, and this Ophis clone…

Yep, this castle was filled with unimaginably formidable beings!

"I've got something to say to Marius, so I'm gonna roll on through here, all right? Let's keep it chill, yeah? This place is home for those vampires, and they don't like seeing fights round these parts. Their pride runs high, and they don't get out much." Grinning ear to ear, Rizevim took off with the other Ophis by his side.

As for us… All we could do was stand there helplessly and watch them pass by!

"Rizevim!" Azazel called to his departing figure. "Vali is coming for you. Just so you know."

"Ah, right. Yeah, my grandkid was raised by your Grigori, huh?" Rizevim said, glancing over his shoulder. "Is he getting stronger, then? He might be tougher than my dumb kid—my grandkid's pops—but that ain't saying much."

"He's gonna get you one of these days."

Rizevim's grin widened. "Whoa. I think I'm gonna tear up, hearing that." The next moment, he turned to catch me in his gaze, his eyes narrowing in amusement. "So you're the new Red Dragon Emperor, huh? The one packing the power of the Great Red and Ophis? Talk about premium. Ever thought about rolling with us?"

—! Was he trying to recruit me?! He had to be joking!

"I'd never go with you," I answered without a moment's hesitation.

Rizevim chortled with laughter. "Heh. Too bad."

Still wearing that unsettling grin, he set off again down the corridor, waving a hand behind him. "If you wanna team up against them vampires to flip the script on their coup, I'm down for it anytime," he quipped, flippant to the very end.

The next moment, a resounding crash echoed down the corridor.

Uncharacteristically, Azazel had given way to anger and was smashing his fists against the wall.

"…Vali, I get why you want to beat the crap out of that bastard."

The Tsepesh fortress was infested with ominous, terrifying beings.

After arriving in the quarters set aside for us, we decided to visit the head of the Vladi family—Gasper's father—in the castle's dungeon.

Life.2

Bloodlines of the Night

All was silent within the fortress, the only sounds those of the occasional passing maid or soldiers on patrol.

Rias and Gasper had been taken to the queen's chambers after Valerie requested to see them while Azazel was busy talking to a vampire who all but reeked with Marius's stench.

In the first case, Valerie probably just wanted to talk. As for the latter, the high-ranking vampire probably sought Azazel's knowledge regarding Sacred Gears.

…Having received permission to see Gasper's father while we were waiting, we remaining members of the Occult Research Club followed a maid to the basement where he was being imprisoned.

The maid led us through the stone corridors, down a staircase into the depths below.

After several minutes, we came out into a vast space lined by doorways.

"This is the Vladi family head's guest room," the maid said, stopping at one of them.

Guest room…? It was rather modest for a nobleman, wasn't it? At least it didn't look like your typical prison.

She knocked on the door, then called inside, "You have a visitor." With that, she unlocked the door and gestured for us to enter.

Nodding to each other, we stepped inside.

…It was far more opulent than I had expected, fitted with luxurious furniture and with a huge chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

Right. It was clearly designed so that nobles wouldn't cause too much of a stir if imprisoned here.

The person seated on the sofa in the center of the room rose to

his feet when he saw us.

He was a young blond-haired man, probably in his mid-thirties. He did indeed have a fatherly look about him and more than a passing resemblance to Gasper.

Akeno stepped forward to introduce us. "Greetings. We are in the service of the demon Rias Gremory. My name is Akeno Himejima, Rias Gremory's Queen."

In Rias's absence, Akeno took on the role of leader, conducting herself with grace so as not to cause any affront.

The man nodded, then motioned toward the sofa. "Please, take a seat… Ah, you're here to talk about *it*—Gasper, I mean?" he said, quick to recognize the purpose of our visit.

Akeno sat on the sofa, the rest of us standing in a line behind her.

…The man did indeed resemble Gasper, but he had a paler complexion, along with a somewhat artificial beauty. He didn't have a shadow, either—proof of his pure-blooded heritage.

"I've already spoken with Rias," he said. "We had a fruitful discussion. We were still discussing how to proceed when I was summoned to the castle…where I'm being held captive, ashamed as I am to admit it. I never expected a coup to unfold so quietly or for our king to be deposed. After my imprisonment, it seems Prince Marius ordered my son to bring Rias here."

He was surprisingly calm given the weight of the conversation. He didn't sound particularly upset, either. If anything, he had accepted his situation.

…But something had been bothering me for a while now.

The way he had said the word *it*.

I didn't want to dwell too much on it, and yet…

Fortunately, Akeno had the same question I did. "*It*, you said?"

"Yes… It—Gasper—seems to be functioning rather well as a demon. I was honestly surprised when Rias told me."

His own father referred to him as *it*…?

…That was just cruel. It was one thing to distinguish between pure-blooded and half-blood vampires, but to refer to your own son like that…

"…Gasper's mother…?" Akeno asked.

His father nodded. “Yes. She passed away shortly after giving birth to it.”

“It was a difficult birth?”

For the first time, a flicker of emotion crossed the man’s face, his eyes narrowing as he furrowed his brow. “No… From the shock.”

—!

What did *that* mean? We all stood there puzzled, when Gasper’s father folded his hands in his lap and continued his horrifying tale. “The *thing* that came out of her womb—it was pure evil.”

“What?” Akeno asked, clearly struggling to grasp what he meant.

The rest of us were in the same boat, for that matter.

I couldn’t make heads or tails of what Gasper’s father meant.

What he was describing didn’t sound anything like the Gasper I knew.

Gasper’s father had to squeeze his next words out. “When *it* was born…it didn’t have a human form. It was a grotesque, writhing, formless black mass that emerged from its mother’s womb. Neither human nor vampire. Not quite a monster, either. An unnamable *thing*. Its mother lost her mind when she saw it. That’s how she died.”

…

…H-hold on. Wait. W-was he really talking about Gasper here…? A black, writhing, formless *thing*…? It was like he had witnessed the birth of some bizarre monster.

No. Hold on… That didn’t sound too different from the powers he had recently awakened…

But Gasper’s father wasn’t finished.

“Several of those who witnessed it, including the midwife, died mysterious deaths over the days that followed.”

…Mysterious deaths? The people who were present at his birth…?

“It was a deadly curse, I suppose,” he added.

…So they were killed by a curse?

“You’re saying Gasper cursed them?” I demanded, realizing full well I was overstepping my bounds.

His father, however, didn’t seem to mind. “Yes. He must have unwittingly released it on them. A few hours after he was born, he

changed into what looked like a normal baby. But by then, his mother had already left us."

…Hey, come on. Seriously?

That went way beyond anything I could have imagined!

"Does Gasper know about this?" Akeno asked.

His father shook his head. "No. I never told it. I had no way of knowing what might trigger it to change back to its original form. I didn't want to needlessly provoke it… Some relatives, unaware of its true nature, find its time-stopping Sacred Gear unsettling, but the rest of us know there are infinitely more disturbing things than its ability to freeze time." He covered his mouth with one hand, apprehension etched into his features. His tone of voice turned grave. "I'm afraid we can't recognize it as either vampire or human… To us, it's an anomalous entity. We treated it as a half-breed for a time…but I can't say if that was the right approach. And now, without even understanding its true nature, we've let it escape into the outside world…"

I had to speak up.

"I don't know what Gasper was like in the past. But he's a demon now, part of our Familia. Even if his body is consumed by darkness, he's still my friend."

Koneko likewise stepped forward. "Gasper is my dear friend, too. He's the first friend I ever made my own age."

Koneko… She was the closest to him among any of us, so she could speak with confidence.

"You've all seen its true nature?" Gasper's father asked.

Did he mean when he was cloaked in darkness, controlling those shadows?

We all nodded.

His father flashed us a forced smile. "I see… I asked Rias Gremory the same thing, and she gave me a similar response. *'If he isn't a human and he isn't a vampire, then he's a demon. I'm the one who reincarnated him, after all. Whatever his true nature is, there's no question he's a demon of the Gremory Familia.'* Yes, that was what she said."

I…I was moved!

Our master's love for us—it was boundless!

Gasper's father curled his lips in the faintest of smiles. "That's a sentiment we find hard to grasp, but very well. If you can still say that after witnessing its true nature, then perhaps you *can* save it."

The conversation continued for a while after that, but we came no closer to uncovering Gasper's true identity.

However, one thing I did understand clearly—the Vladi family didn't welcome Gasper's presence here… I got the impression Rias's talks were proceeding with the intention of formally handing him over to us.

In other words, there was no place for him in this vampire world.

After wrapping up our discussion, we headed back upstairs—when a maid greeted us with a polite bow. "Master Issei Hyoudou, Honorable Koneko Toujou, her Majesty Queen Valerie wishes to see you."

Koneko and I exchanged measured looks.

…An invitation from Gasper's old friend and savior.

Ravel had warned me I would have a demanding schedule ahead, and I couldn't shake the feeling she had been spot on.

So many concerns had begun to weigh on my mind since our arrival here…

Koneko and I followed the maid to an indoor garden on the upper floors of the castle, completely enclosed without any windows. Colorful flowers grew under the glow of the artificial light, and the gentle sound of running water filled the air.

In the center of the garden was a table, which Rias, Gasper, and Valerie Tsepesh were already sitting around.

The maid showed Koneko and me to our seats.

…I couldn't help but notice an unsettling presence nearby. Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted Crom Cruach lurking in the shadows.

"…" He stared back at us in silence, then closed his eyes.

Valerie let out a light chuckle. "Crom Cruach is just my bodyguard."

…He was quite the formidable bodyguard. Valerie was being protected by an evil dragon, while that old geezer Rizevim had his own private Ophis clone guarding his back.

Those guardians were no joke. I couldn't afford to mess with them. Before arriving here, I assumed I could probably snatch Valerie herself if worst came to worst, but not with that guy looming over my shoulder…

While I was busy entertaining that dark thought, Valerie placed a teacup before me and started pouring tea.

"Rias has told me all about Gasper's life in Japan," she said, flashing me a bright smile. "It seems like a very peaceful country. What do you think, Issei Hyoudou?"

…Was I supposed to use humble language with her…? After all, she did save Gasper when they were kids, and more importantly, she was this country's new leader.

"U-um. Yes, Japan has a wealth of good food and fun things to do. Y-your Majesty…"

Valerie chuckled in amusement. "Please, there's no need to stand on ceremony, Issei Hyoudou. I've asked Rias to talk to me normally as well. You can just call me Valerie."

"That's right, Issei," Rias insisted.

Well, if they were both giving me their permission, there was no need to hold back.

"Right. Got it. Valerie."

"Oh-ho. Thank you."

She came across as an incredibly delicate young woman.

Yet her expression… A shadow skulked behind her smile—fragile, pained, hinting at the weight of everything she had been forced to endure to come this far…

She turned next to Koneko. "I wonder what kind of sweets they have in Japan. You must know, Koneko Toujou. Could you tell me?"

"Um. Well, I like…"

From there, the conversation took a lighthearted turn.

To Valerie, so many of the mundane, everyday things we took for granted were new and intriguing, and she fired off with the most unexpected of questions.

"I see. Do you know why Gasper likes dressing up as a girl? Because I used to make him play dress-up with me when we were little! He hated it at first, but before long, he started doing it on his own… Hee-hee!"

"N-ngh! Valerie! Don't tell them that!"

"I wonder if he still needs a stuffed toy to help him fall asleep?"

"I—I… Uh…"

"Hee-hee. I see. That's so like you, Gasper."

The two of them looked remarkably comfortable in each other's presence. Gasper, for one, was speaking so naturally and freely.

"How lovely! I want to try Japanese cakes. They sound so mysterious and delicious. I prefer sweets to blood, you know? Human blood is rather thick, you see. Hee-hee."

While she certainly gave off an otherworldly aura, once we started talking, she responded just like any normal girl her age.

From time to time, however, she started speaking to something beyond us…

"…Yes… ———. I know. ———. But that…"

…She was no doubt speaking to departed spirits again.

"…I can't see it, but I can sense negative *qi* energy where she's speaking," Koneko whispered to me.

Koneko, it seemed, felt something through her knowledge of sage arts. Frankly, I was impressed her senses were already picking up the souls drawn to the Holy Grail.

All at once, Valerie glanced up at the ceiling. "You've seen the sun, haven't you, Gasper?" she asked with the most fragile of looks.

"Yes. I'm a daywalker… I thought you were, too?"

"Yes." Valerie flashed him a faint smile. "But I've never been allowed outside… Just once, I want to have tea with you under the sun. Picnics are supposed to be such fun."

…She had never been outside? Locked indoors since the day she was born? I could only imagine how much worse it must have been since she had awakened the Holy Grail's latent powers.

The simple act of going outside during the day, which we all took for granted, must have felt so extraordinary to her.

Rias, a smile of her own gracing her lips, came out with a

suggestion. “In that case, why don’t you join us? We could take you to some tourist spots in Japan.”

At this, a sparkle returned to Valerie’s eyes. “That sounds lovely. A picnic in the sun with your Occult Research Club.”

She really did have a magnificent smile.

…Yep, Rias was right! I jumped to my feet!

“We can show you around Japan! You know lots of good places, right, Gaspy? Why don’t we take Valerie to them?”

Gasper’s face lit up. “Y-yes!” He nodded, buzzing with energy. “Come to Japan with us, Valerie! It might be hard since you’ve just become queen…but once the chaos settles, you should be able to take some time off! No, I’ll come and get you! Japan is full of kind people, there’s delicious food everywhere, and the different seasons are so exciting!”

“Ha-ha! For a shut-in, you’re really getting into the groove, Gasper!” I said with a grin.

“N-ngh! Issei! D-don’t tease me! I’m serious here!”

“Yes, Gaspy is asking someone out on a date for the first time in his life. Don’t tease him.”

Uh-oh, Koneko was giving me a sharp warning!

“Oh-ho-ho,” Rias chuckled.

Right, we just needed to find a way to get her out of here. The Holy Grail was practically a prison for her… But deep down, she wanted what any girl her age would!

So if we could take her out, if she could just enjoy herself, we might be able to bring her back from the brink…

The next moment, a new voice intruded on our pleasant conversation.

“You seem to be enjoying yourselves.”

It was Marius Tsepesh, stepping into the garden with a contrived smile, all but clad in malice and ill intent.

In an instant, the light faded from Valerie’s eyes. “Marius,” she answered, her expression forced. “I was talking to Gasper and Rias.”

“Excuse me,” he said to us all. “I heard Valerie had guests, so I thought I ought to join you. I hope I’m not intruding?”

…He was really putting that to us as a question?

He was obviously here to see if we were trying to throw a wrench into his plans.

Smiling until just a moment ago, Rias now wore a reluctant look. "No, not at all… On the contrary, I should apologize for my Knight's rudeness earlier," she said on Xenovia's behalf.

Marius smirked. "No, no. I'm sure it's hard for those from lower realms to understand these things." He shrugged.

"U-um!" Gasper began, fixing him with a determined look.

"What is it, Gasper Vladi?"

"…Could you let Valerie go free?" he asked unflinchingly, cutting straight to the point. "I'll do anything to help her. So please! Don't make her suffer anymore…"

…That must have taken considerable courage. Yep, he had certainly grown as a man of the Gremory Familia. Heck, he might end up being the most chivalrous and charming of us all.

…Well, it *was* a little hard to imagine.

Marius cupped his chin with one hand.

"…"

The next moment, his lips twisted in a bright smile. "Very well. Let's release her."

…Now *that* I wasn't expecting! Unless…

"However, I will need a little time," he continued. "After all, our new administration has only just come into power, so it would be rather awkward for our new queen to step down so soon. Grant us time, and I assure you I'll hand her over to you down the track."

He turned to Valerie. "You can go to Japan if you like. You can even live in peace and harmony with Gasper Vladi here."

"But the Holy Grail…," she began, confused.

Marius placed a hand on her shoulder. "There's no need to worry about that. You don't have to use it anymore. It's already fulfilled its purpose. Consider yourself *released* from the Holy Grail."

"R-really? Wow! Gasper! Maybe I *can* go to Japan!"

"Yes! That's great! I—I'm glad!"

The two childhood friends took each other's hands, rejoicing.

"Thank you!" Gasper said, bowing to Marius. "Thank you!"

"No. It's my pleasure. Oh-ho." A cryptic smile played at his lips.

Rias, Koneko, and I remained silent.

…He wasn't just suspicious. He was downright sinister.

This was inconceivable. There was no way he would give her up, much less the Holy Grail.

Rias and Koneko were just as dubious as I was, fixing him with skeptical frowns.

Gasper and Valerie, however, took his words at face value.

He was going to *release* her, was he…?

There was an ominous ring to that.

And so our hearts heavy with doubt, the tea party came to an end.

-○●○-

"For a vampire town, it looks pretty ordinary."

Spread out before me was a strange town covered in pure white snow, row after row of European-style buildings like you might see on TV.

I was with Asia, Xenovia, Irina, and Rossweisse, taking a look around the town under veil of night.

Two days had passed since our discussion with Valerie over tea, and there had been no noteworthy developments during that time. With so many of us bored sick, trying to pass the hours in our guest rooms, Rias suggested we try taking a stroll around the castle town.

The five of us decided to take her up on that offer. As for the others…

Azazel had gone to visit the vampires' Sacred Gear research facility and still hadn't returned after two full days… I was sure he was fine, but what on earth could he be up to…?

Rias and Akeno remained locked in discussion with Gasper's father, still imprisoned below the fortress, while Kiba continued to serve as our master's bodyguard. I was told there were a great many differences to overcome, seeing as the other side belonged to vampire society while we were demons, but the talks were apparently proceeding smoothly.

Gasper and Koneko were being invited to tea on a daily basis. For a newly enthroned monarch, Valerie sure seemed to have a lot of time on her hands…

…The Tsepesh queen couldn't possibly be that idle, especially not after the recent coup. Even an idiot like me knew this was when leaders had to take decisive action. Sure, hers might be a puppet regime, but it still didn't make any sense.

…And what Marius said about *releasing* her continued to bother me… No matter how you looked at it, that was an ominous way of putting it. The fact that there hadn't been any significant developments over the past two days only added to my unease…

If we could get Valerie out of here, we might be okay. But with that evil dragon following her all the time…

No, I couldn't let him cow me. I might be able to get her out of here if push came to shove, even if it did mean fighting Crom Cruach…

I appreciated Ddraig's advice, but at the same time, I couldn't overlook the level of danger Valerie was in.

So what could we do? We couldn't stay here forever…

"Issei? Is something wrong?" Asia asked, peering into my face.

"A-ah. Sorry. I was just thinking."

I had to snap out of it. After all, Rias had given us the day to explore. I should take the opportunity to look around while I could.

The next thing I knew, we had arrived in the downtown area.

Signs for all sorts of stores dotted the street—everything from clothing shops to small grocers and even restaurants. Humans turned vampires, it seemed, could eat food as well as consume blood, though the purer one's vampire heritage, the more blood they needed to take in.

Gasper, for instance, preferred regular food, though he still needed a small amount of blood from time to time.

…I tried looking around the shops, but the responses of everyone around me were impossible to ignore.

Most cast furtive glances our way.

"It's pretty clear they don't want us here," Xenovia remarked.

Irina shrugged. "Sure, this is a big castle town, but it's still a

closed-off society. They probably aren't used to outsiders. Remember what it was like when we'd go on missions to foreign countries?"

"I guess it's kind of like that. That's the first challenge you come across when you're raised in the Church, being sent abroad to someplace you've never been before."

They had both stood out like a sore thumb when they'd first come to Japan. Then again, they had never even tried to blend in, going around from the start dressed like combat operatives.

"There was so much I didn't know when I first came to Japan," Asia added. "It was so confusing."

It took her a while to get used to life in Japan, and it wasn't just the food. So many everyday things were new to her—household appliances especially. Having lived such a simple life, she found modern-day conveniences a huge shock.

Speaking of conveniences, the residents of this vampire town were zipping around on cars and motorcycles. A lot of them were former humans, so it made sense. It was hard to give up human technology once you had gotten used to it.

I thought they would be using horses. Given how they kept themselves isolated from every other faction, I assumed they didn't like foreign technology. There certainly weren't a lot of modern appliances in the castle. Even the soldiers were dressed in medieval armor.

That didn't apply to the town, however, where modernity was sprinkled all about.

Come to think of it, the Carmilla vampires also had cars.

Just like demon society in the underworld, vampiric society was flexible enough to embrace convenience where they could.

Being vampires, everyone's schedule here was the opposite of what you might find in the human world—they slept during the day and came to life at night.

Xenovia let out a heavy sigh. "I really don't like being followed…"

Right. Just as she'd said, several figures had been tailing us since we left the castle. We knew this would happen ahead of time, but even so… It *did* make me feel uncomfortable.

"There's no helping it," I said. "They might have let us outside, but we're still their guests."

Our hosts were probably worried about what we might get up to. Maybe they thought we might stir up trouble with the locals or try to share information they didn't want to leak out.

Not that we were about to do anything like that.

I noticed Rossweisse eyeing a line of stores across the road.

"I wasn't expecting you to come with us," I said.

She puffed out her chest. "I had to come. I'm a teacher at Kuou Academy, and you're my students. I need to look out for you. This trip to Romania is an opportunity for a private lesson."

For all that grand declaration, her eyes sparkled as she admired the items on display in the store window.

"…Hmm… Yes, that one looks interesting…"

Something told me she was the one enjoying this the most…

The town remained unaffected by the coup, and the residents out on the streets didn't seem the slightest bit troubled.

It looked like they really were unaware a civil war had broken out and their king had fled the realm, leaving his people behind…

"Welcome! Would you like to try some locally produced tea?" Despite the wide-scale apprehension we faced, there were those shopkeepers who approached us with lighthearted ease.

"I don't see any discount stores… I thought they would be a hit in the vampire world…," Rossweisse lamented under her breath.

…W-was she really expecting that…? Just how obsessed was she with hundred-yen stores…?

I was just about to butt in with a joke…when I noticed something in the corner of my vision.

It was a girl, just like Ophis, standing in front of a street vendor's stall.

"…"

She was staring at the items on display. Accessories—one of which was shaped like a bright red dragon.

"…Um, Miss… Which one would you like?" The store owner looked to be having a hard time engaging with her, seeing how she just kept staring silently at the items.

We were all startled to find the Ophis clone—Lilith—here of all places.

…I didn't sense any suspicious figures around. Was she here by herself…?

We glanced at one another in bewilderment, unsure how best to respond…

Breathing a sigh, I stepped forward, then pointed to the item captivating her. "Do you want it…?" I asked.

Finally noticing me, she peered into my face.

"…"

Silence filled the air.

"I'll take this one," I said to the owner.

Using the money Rias had given me to spend during our stay here, I bought the dragon accessory and offered it to Lilith. "Here. See you."

With that, I set off, the others following suit. I didn't want to risk any trouble, so it was best to move on.

But at that moment, something tugged at my sleeve. It was Lilith.

"…Wh-what?" I asked.

She stared back expressionless. "I'm hungry…"

I watched in silence as the other Ophis munched on an assortment of cabbage rolls and grilled meats.

In the end, I had reluctantly led her to a nearby restaurant.

Romanian dishes lined the table, but there was an array of international cuisine on offer, too. Naturally. The vampires who lived here came from all over the world, so it made sense the items would be equally diverse.

The Romanian dishes were certainly nice, but I found myself drawn to the familiar comfort of Japanese-style food. I never would have thought I could enjoy a tofu dish in this world of vampires… I took a pinch here, a pinch there…

Ugh. It *looked* like tofu, but the taste wasn't quite right… Japanese food was probably enjoyed best in Japan after all…

Lilith didn't mind, though, tossing even the not-quite-tofu into her

mouth without complaint.

"Is it good?" I asked.

"…I don't know," she answered, her lips covered in crumbs and sauce.

"There's something on your mouth," Asia pointed out, wiping it away for her with a napkin. "There you go."

No sooner were her lips clean than she started eating again…just as messily as before.

Xenovia watched on, chin rested on one hand. "So this is what happened to Ophis's stolen powers…? Maybe this is our chance?"

By "chance," she probably meant to extract information on the reborn Khaos Brigade—or else to whisk the Ophis clone somewhere far away.

Irina shrugged. "We'd better not. We're being watched. It's sure to cause trouble if we get too close to her. She's a member of the Khaos Brigade, so the world will think she's the real Ophis. The real one, living with us, doesn't officially exist, which means this one here is the real one as far as the other factions are concerned."

Right. Our minders were already in the restaurant with us anyway, so we couldn't do anything rash. On top of that, the Ophis copy herself was incredibly powerful. We would have a huge problem on our hands if she resisted.

The people following us knew full well neither we nor anyone else would be able to spirit her away.

"Well, a meal shouldn't be too much, at least," I concluded, deciding not to get any more involved than that.

Of course, I would try to learn as much as I could by observing her. We had the real Ophis back at our place—the one here was just a stolen fragment of the original.

Once she had finished eating, Lilith set down her food—and started to sniff me.

She was breathing deeply… Hold on—did I stink? I checked to make sure, but I couldn't smell anything…

"…You smell like me," she said at last, tilting her expressionless face to one side just like Ophis did.

"…Um… Maybe I smell like Ophis?" I thought out loud.

Her scent could have transferred to me without my realizing it.

"…It may be on your body right now," Rossweisse remarked.

"…I remember. It smells like a huge red dragon," Lilith murmured.

—.

A huge red dragon. Did she mean the Great Red?

My current body was created with a piece of the Great Red, so it wasn't all that surprising I may have picked up part of his scent. But from what Lilith said, it seemed she didn't have all the memories of her original self.

Still, I was surprised. Ophis was obsessed with the Great Red, and to think this fragment of her recognized him, too…

Ophis's relationship with the Great Red ran deeper than I initially thought.

I took a breath, then tried introducing myself again. "I'm Issei Hyoudou. That's Asia, and then there's Xenovia, Irina, and Rossweisse."

"Hello," Asia said with a soft smile.

"…Issei… Hyoudou… Issei… Hyoudou…," Lilith repeated.

Huh? Was she having a hard time remembering it?

"Just Issei's fine," I said encouragingly.

"…"

She remained silent, even more devoid of emotion than Ophis herself. Just what sort of ability had been used to create her?

Satisfied, she rose to her feet without a further word.

"Are you leaving?" I asked.

"…Rizevim," she said, without even turning to look over her shoulder. "I have to protect him."

That was all.

The rest of us exchanged measured glances, finished our meal, and rushed back to the castle.

-○●○-

When we returned to our quarters, Azazel was waiting for us, already deep in conversation with the other members.

"Ah, it's you guys," he said, addressing us. "I just got back myself… So how was it out there?"

"Pretty normal," I answered. "Like you said, I don't think the townspeople know anything about the coup."

"I figured as much," he muttered.

"Mr. Azazel!" Gasper called out, filled with energy and making the rare move to strike up a conversation. "Marius promised to set Valerie free! Isn't that wonderful! We'll be able to take her back to Japan with us!"

At that, Azazel fixed the rest of us with a hard look. "What happened?"

We recounted our conversation with Valerie and Marius. Rias, it seemed, had already updated him on the situation with the Vladi family (though we hadn't filled in Gasper himself on it yet), so he had a basic grasp of what was going on.

Azazel motioned for me, Rias, and Akeno to join him in a corner of the room.

Then, whispering so Gasper and Asia couldn't hear, he said: "You all get what he means by *set her free*, right…?"

"Yes. I didn't think it sounded good…," I murmured back.

Azazel nodded. "He's probably gonna try extracting the Holy Grail. Our Grigori procedures must have leaked. My money's on him doing it right here. They've got the backing of the Khaos Brigade, after all."

…He was going to extract it?

A memory flashed through my mind of Asia stripped of her Twilight Healing.

…*That* was what Marius was trying to pull? And he was going to parade it in front of Gasper…?!

Rias's eyes blazed with anger. "Given the way he was talking about it, he'll likely take action soon. We need to inform Gasper… You're despicable, Marius Tsepesh…!"

Turning against his own kin, as Marius had, was unforgivable—but I sensed Rias was even angrier at herself for having kept Gasper in the dark. Her inner conflict was a testament to her love and compassion!

I, too, was simmering with rage, but there wasn't anything I

could do about it right now.

"If push comes to shove, I want to get her out of here. At this rate, it's only a matter of time before she's in real danger," I said in an impassioned whisper.

Rias nodded in agreement. "I hope we can find a safe way out of this land. I've already asked Bennia to prepare an escape route… But we do need to think this through."

Yes. We had to stay vigilant. It was just a matter of timing now…

Rejoining the others in the center of the room, I shook my head and changed the subject. "By the way, where have you been these past two days, Teach?" I asked.

"…Researching Sacred Gears in the possession of half-vampires. There have been a lot of them born with Sacred Gears in recent years. I'm not sure why."

Half-vampire Sacred Gear users? Gasper and Valerie both fit into that category.

…But I didn't know they were increasing in number…

"The problem is these vampire researchers don't have a deep understanding of Sacred Gears," he continued. "Sure, there are some, like Marius, who try to piece together what they can, but their accomplishments are a far cry from the Grigori's work. So I've shared a few critical insights with them."

"…Are you sure about that?" I asked. "Right after taking power in a coup, with their internal politics such a huge mess…? Besides, I thought vampires hated that sort of thing…?"

I didn't want to imagine how the coup faction that had recently taken control of the country might make use of that information. At the same time, I wondered whether they might just dismiss his advice given their aversion to outside interference.

"The researchers I met with had been working on this stuff since before the coup. They were more interested in what I had to say than any stupid vampire pride. Marius took control of everything to do with the Holy Grail, so I doubt they were directly involved in the rebellion. And I only gave them the bare minimum of information they needed. I mean, these guys are facing threats from Sacred Gears, too."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Azazel's expression turned stern. "Balance Breakers. You know Cao Cao shared his group's strategy for unlocking them, right?"

"Ah!" Irina gasped, suddenly remembering something. "If a half-vampire unhappy with the way they've been treated decided to go on a rampage…"

Azazel nodded. "That's what I mean. A Balance Breaker is a good way to pull free from someone who's been holding you to the ground, and it isn't rare for people to use their abilities for revenge. The problem is folks from just about any background are attracted to Balance Breakers, and then they'll go nuts with them. The vampires here have seen it time and time again. Basically, they need some urgent countermeasures. So I dropped a few hints and promised to send some help from the Grigori. It's the same sort of problem demon society has been grappling with."

So he promised to work with them? He sure wasn't one to let an opportunity to study new Sacred Gears pass him by.

"You've got a soft side, Teach," Xenovia said with a wry grin.

"…I just want to gather all the intel I can," he answered, scratching the back of his head. "With all these unpredictable developments, the most important thing is information. Especially with this smorgasbord of Sacred Gears that have been popping up lately. You never know which piece of data could prove essential."

So Cao Cao's strategies had spread this far…? In a world that discriminated between pure-blooded vampires and everything else, maybe it was only natural the downtrodden would seek them out…

Vampire society had refrained from seeking the help of the other factions up till now. They had probably tried dealing with this Balance Breaker threat alone to limited success.

If a malicious half-vampire wielding a Balance Breaker were to descend on the human world… No, there was every possibility some had already infiltrated human society… Ugh… But there wasn't anything to be gained worrying about it now…

"I regret I couldn't make contact with the Holy Grail—Valerie—sooner. Marius has monopolized her… If I could just take a look at it, we might be able to come up with a counterstrategy…" Azazel looked

genuinely chagrined. With Marius as protective of the Holy Grail as he was, a private meeting between Azazel and Valerie was no doubt off-limits.

"What about the underworld? What does Sirzechs think?" I asked. "You've sent word to him, right?"

Rizevim's presence here, the son of the original Lucifer, was something the underworld couldn't overlook, not when he had secretly aided in the Tsepesh coup. All the more so for Sirzechs, who was the current bearer of the name Lucifer.

Azazel squeezed his eyes shut. "I sent a report on Rizevim's involvement, but I haven't received a reply yet. With all the panic around Euclid Lucifugus popping up, throwing Rizevim into the mix is a recipe for complete chaos. Sirzechs will be so busy keeping everything in order that he won't be able to make any moves here to help us. Especially not with Rizevim being the son of the old Lucifer… There are still those who support the old Demon King regime in remote corners of the underworld. It wouldn't be surprising if they rose up to challenge him."

…The rest of us sat there in shocked silence.

The exceptional nature of the original Lucifer bloodline was something even a rookie demon like me could grasp. What would happen to the underworld if the supporters of the old regime tried to make a comeback…? Their group had already gone on a rampage during the trouble with the Hero Faction, and it took considerable time and effort for Sairaorg to quell the uprising…

Yep. There were those for whom our current peace was endless torment.

The sentiment Vali shared with me during our battle against the evil god Loki flashed through my mind.

…So long as we lived in peace, someone else was probably suffering…

—.

At that moment, an inexplicable sensation washed over us all—like the room had been caught in some kind of ward. It wasn't a bad feeling, but that was because I recognized it from before.

Like that, a magic square in the design of the Sitri Familia

materialized on the ceiling overhead, a head poking through.

It was the grim reaper girl, Bennia!

"Hello! It took a while to make a connection from the outside, but luckily, I got through."

Bennia had secretly made her way to the city after parting ways with us at the gondola station. She was finally here. Considering how closely we were being watched, her caution was probably for the best.

Was the ward needed so she could jump here by teleportation square? Or was this the escape route Rias had mentioned…? I hoped no one else in the castle had sensed it…

Meanwhile, someone else passed through the magic square and hit the floor with a loud thud. "Kyargh!" sounded a cute voice as she hit the ground…

It was Elmenhilde, rubbing her lower back after her failed landing. Next came Rugal, touching down easily on the floor, and then Bennia, swooping down from the ceiling.

"Ah!" Elmenhilde exclaimed when she saw us all staring at her, quickly rising to her feet and clearing her throat. "Greetings, everyone. It's a pleasure to see you all again."

She acknowledged us with her usual high-handed attitude…but I couldn't unsee her fumbling that landing. It was pretty cute, in its own way!

"I see you managed to sneak into the country, Elmenhilde," Rias said.

"Of course." She nodded. "I bumped into Bennia in an alleyway while discussing a way into the castle with one of our agents… I have news for you." She paused there with a solemn look. "We've received word that Marius Tsepesh is pushing ahead with the final phase of his Holy Grail agenda."

—!

Gasper's face tensed up.

The final phase…?

"…Already…?" Azazel muttered.

"It seems they plan to extract the Holy Grail from Valerie Tsepesh and use it to seize complete control," Elmenhilde continued. "Their

goal is to increase its power output and transform everyone in the castle town."

…I knew it! They were making their move…!

Not only were they going to extract the Holy Grail, but also they wanted to use it to subjugate the entire country! Even reforging its inhabitants against their will!

Azazel rested a hand under his chin and narrowed his eyes. "The Holy Grail part I was expecting…but turning everyone in the city into invincible vampires? Would they even *be* vampires at that point?"

Elmenhilde made no effort to hide her disgust. "It's abominable. They want to use the Holy Grail to turn the people into other creatures with vampire traits. Those of us from the Carmilla bloc who have infiltrated the town are going to have to join forces with the legitimate Tsepesh government to remove the insurgents."

So they were already poised to launch a countercoup?

Now that the truth had been thrust on him, Gasper trembled, his expression clouding over. "Um… If the Holy Grail is extracted…what will happen to Valerie…?"

"She'll die," Azazel said, leaving no room for debate. "This must have been their plan from the beginning, to extract it once the Sacred Gear was mature enough and their research was far enough along to pull it off. When a Sacred Gear's host dies, it normally moves on to its next one. But if they can extract it first, they can keep on using it without limit."

Gasper crumpled to the floor, bursting into tears. "N-no… Marius said he would set her free… That we could bring her to Japan… Was it all a lie…?"

Rias reached out to hold him close. "He's a rare breed of scumbag… He's revolting," she said, her eyes shooting daggers.

"I knew it. We need to find her before—"

But before I could finish speaking, a dazzling beam of light spilled into the room.

It wasn't morning. There were still a few hours left before sunrise.

We rushed to the window to see what was happening outside.

What we saw was a huge wall of light enveloping the castle!

Was that…a magic square?

Azazel clicked his tongue in frustration. "They're already making their move?! They must know the Carmilla are on to them. Those bastards! That's the ritual to extract the Holy Grail! There are some changes to the design in the magic square, but that's definitely the technique used to remove a Sacred Gear!"

A magic square strong enough to extract a Longinus…

Dammit! Marius was really doing it! We had to hurry before it was too late!

Elmenhilde stood at the center of the square Bennia had made. "I'll work with my people from the outside. You all need to escape as quickly as you can."

Azazel heaved a sigh. "You still won't accept us lending you a hand? You're facing terrorists, and those evil dragons will be out there, too."

Elmenhilde flashed him a bullish grin. "Yes. This is a vampire problem…" She paused there, closing her eyes in thought. "Or so I would like to say. Queen Carmilla, however, has given us approval to accept your help," she said, not sounding entirely happy with that decision.

It wasn't like we were waiting for anyone's *approval* here… But I guess they had to keep up appearances. I did feel like telling them to cut the crap, though.

"Gasper Vladi," Elmenhilde said, staring directly at him. "Do you wish to retrieve the Holy Grail? Or rather, Valerie Tsepesh?"

"Of course!" he answered without a moment's hesitation.

Elmenhilde nodded. "Very well. In that case, I will allow you to take your friends with you. The rest of you, I ask that you assist and protect him. After all, our original intention was to use Gasper Vladi's powers to stop Valerie Tsepesh."

How arrogant could she be?! Was that all she cared about…?!

"In that case, farewell for now. I apologize for the trouble, but could you lead me back outside?" she said, asking Bennia to reactivate the teleportation square.

"You're letting us take charge without much fuss, huh?" I muttered, unable to shake the thought.

There was more I wanted to say, but I held back.

"I have great respect for your abilities," she said with a sarcastic smile—and like that, she vanished into the magic square.

"Aaahhh!" her screams echoed from the other side…

Bennia stuck her tongue out playfully. *"I connected the other end to a ceiling."*

…Ah. So she had fallen again…

"I'll save her," Gasper said, his gaze rock-solid. "I'll save her! Everyone! Please! I need your help!"

—.

…Yep, he was a man of the Gremory Familia all right.

"Of course!" I said, turning to him with a smile. "That's why we're here! To save Valerie!"

"I'm here for you!" Xenovia said dauntlessly. "You're my junior, after all! I'll show you how much power I'm packing."

Next up was Kiba. "I'm a Knight of the Gremory Familia. You can count on me. Besides, I'd like to see how well my techniques fare against enhanced pure-blooded vampires."

Irina stepped forward. "That's right! We're second-year students! It's our duty to help the first-years! And as Heaven's representative here, it's *my* job to pass judgment on their sins!"

"Yes!" Asia said, joining her. "I'll do my best! I—I'll call Fafnir if we need him!"

Koneko took Gasper's hands in her own. "A friend of yours is a friend of mine… I'll help you."

Akeno wrapped her arms around him in a hug. "Oh-ho. I'll do what I can."

"Let's go, Gasper!" our master, Rias Gremory, declared. "The Gremory Familia—no, the Occult Research Club—will never turn its back on its members!"

Gasper's eyes welled with emotion, but he held it all in. "Issei! President! Koneko! Everyone…! Yes! I'll do my best!"

"We'll do what we can, too!" Bennia added. *"Right, Rugal?"*

"…Yep. We wouldn't deserve to call ourselves part of the Sitri Familia if we didn't follow Lady Sona's orders."

While we offered up words of encouragement, Azazel and

Rossweisse were discussing something a short distance away.

"That's the spirit. Must be good to be young, huh, Rossweisse?"

"Let's unleash some magic."

With everyone in agreement, I raised a fist into the air. "All right, then! Time for the Occult Research Club and the student council's two newest members to go out in force! Let's show those vampires what we're capable of!"

"Yes!"

We demons of Kuou Academy were on the move!

Life.3

Together in the Sunlight

After setting up temporary wards in our guest chambers, we started discussing how best to proceed.

With that huge magic square already deployed, everyone, whether inside the castle or outside the walls, was on a war footing. In other words, we shouldn't be surprised if some of the coup plotters launched an attack on our room.

"Well, the legitimate government should launch their own attack with the Carmilla forces from the outside, so the rebels will need to divert most of their resources to that front," Azazel pointed out. "All the same, we need to stay vigilant."

Indeed. Just as he said, there was no sign of any soldiers coming our way.

Still, the sound of explosions and people crying out was already filtering in from outside… The battle was clearly underway.

Azazel pulled out a floor plan of the castle and spread it on the ground. "I smuggled this in. Take a look. There's a huge cavern under the castle, divided into four main levels. The Tsepesh reportedly conduct their most important rituals in the bottom one. Given the magic square around the castle, that's no doubt where they're going to try to extract the Holy Grail."

"The Khaos Brigade will be down there, too, then," Xenovia said.

Azazel nodded. "Along with all the senior figures involved in the coup and their personal guards. That's our target."

Kiba marked the floor plan with several annotations. "I've gained a fairly accurate picture of the soldiers' movements around the castle over the past two days. That being said, I suspect they've adjusted their patrols given the situation."

So that was what he was doing whenever he wasn't in our

quarters—exploring the castle. His incredible speed no doubt helped him remain undetected by the guards.

"In any case, we'll inevitably encounter powerful foes once we go down there," he said with a defiant grin.

That was just it. Since they were trying to extract the Holy Grail, it stood to reason Marius himself would be there…along with that evil dragon guarding his back.

In other words, we had a hard fight ahead of us. But that was part and parcel for the Gremory Familia.

I let out a deep breath, scratching at the back of my head. "There's never any letup, huh?"

Azazel ruffled my hair. "Well, thanks to that, you've grown considerably. You wouldn't have developed your kind of firepower otherwise." He cast his gaze around the room. "Our objective is to stop them from extracting the Holy Grail. This may sound harsh, but if Marius *does* succeed, we still need to stop him. As for the other top brass… Prioritize your own survival. That being said, feel free to take out the terrorists while you're at it. If we're attacked by one of their evil dragons and the situation turns dire, our priority will be to retrieve Valerie and the Holy Grail and make a run for it. Don't confront them. I'm not asking you to slay an evil dragon here."

That was easy enough to understand… If we bumped into an evil dragon, it would be time to flee.

I didn't want to fight Crom Cruach if I could help it. Even Ddraig had advised against it.

"I—I'll get Valerie back!" Gasper shouted, jumping to his feet.

"Of course!" the rest of us called back, raring to go.

We were all in agreement on that point!

With that done, we took off from the guest room.

We descended the stairs into the underground levels.

We didn't encounter any notable resistance along the route Kiba picked out, though as anticipated, the guards had changed their patrols. Fortunately, however, we only had to deal with a couple of minor skirmishes.

We could still hear the sound of heavy fighting outside, while stray bullets continued to wreak havoc on the castle. We might not have to worry about projectiles reaching us in the basement levels, but I was concerned about the tremors caused by all the combat happening beyond the walls.

It wasn't long before we reached the first underground level.

It was a large open space, more than wide enough to withstand a bit of fighting. The ceiling lights reached deep into the interior, though as a demon, I didn't need to worry about the dark.

Shadowy figures were lined up in rows waiting for us, a battalion of armored vampire soldiers. Each was clutching a weapon, their crimson eyes gleaming menacingly.

…There had to be more than a hundred of them. As turned humans, their vampiric qualities were less pronounced than pure-blooded vampires, but their physical capabilities far exceeded those of ordinary people.

"Well? Who's coming?" Azazel asked, brandishing a spear of light. "I don't want to waste too much energy here if there are more lurking below."

"Azazel will have a lot of work to do once we reach the Holy Grail, so we don't want him wasting his strength in a place like this," Akeno pointed out.

That made sense. He would be needed for the real fight, so it was probably best for him to stick to the rear against these grunts.

Xenovia slung the Durendal over her shoulder. "I'm happy to unleash the Durendal from the get-go, but maybe I should hold off for now?"

Rias nodded. "Yes. You can't keep using it in rapid succession, can you? Let's save it for evil dragon–class opponents, then."

Honestly, Xenovia's mind always went straight to over-the-top violence! Just when I thought she was finally getting the hang of her weapon, she wanted to go full throttle.

"Stop and think, Xenovia!" Irina cautioned her. "I thought you had realized the importance of technique, but you're still all about raw power!"

Xenovia tilted her head to one side. "Yeah, but with Kiba around,

I figured I could leave the fancy tricks to him."

Kiba breathed an exasperated sigh. "I keep telling you, that logic is flawed… We're going to have another meeting when we get back to Japan…"

…I could only imagine what our Familia's other Knight was going through…

"Sorry, Kiba," Irina apologized on her behalf. "Xenovia's always been like this. She'll step up when there aren't enough people around, but the moment the workload is balanced again, she drops out."

Kiba nodded. "Yes. She carries herself with a cool facade, but she's stopped thinking about it day by day…"

A vein throbbed at Xenovia's forehead, her lips pursing in annoyance. "How rude! I *have* been working on it basically nonstop!"

What an unconvincing line! It might have held more weight if it was the first time she said it, but by now, it was utterly devoid of strength!

"…What should we do here?" Rias asked, resting a hand against her forehead. "Maybe we could take them out one by one?"

The next moment, two figures stepped forward.

"…There's no problem."

"I guess this is why we tagged along."

Rugal and Bennia!

"Bennia! Rugal! You're sure you can take them all by yourselves?!" I shouted, worried.

Bennia, however, pulled a sickle longer than she was tall from a subspace fold. *"What's the point of us being here if we don't do our part?"*

Her voice couldn't have been more relaxed—and like that, she leaped at the massed vampire soldiers without a sound!

She wasn't running exactly—more like gliding toward them in that strange way of moving that grim reapers had, so quickly she left afterimages in her wake.

"This little grim reaper girl is coming for you all!" she joked, conjuring multiple copies of herself. The vampire soldiers tried to

attack, but their blades merely passed clean through the illusions, failing to land a hit on their attacker.

Kiba caught his breath in admiration. "Her speed must be beyond comprehension for those afterimages to be sticking around like that. It's all but impossible to follow her movements."

So this was similar to his own technique of moving so quickly as to hide himself among several illusions?

I *could* track her movements—but I knew I still wouldn't be able land a direct hit. The second I dispersed one of the copies, she would strike from an unseen angle.

Basically, she was capable of the same trick Kiba was. Was he remarkable for being able to move as fast as a grim reaper, or was she extraordinary for possessing speed on par with him? They were both impressive…

"You wanna die…? Anyone who sees me ends up dead."

Bennia carved through the first group of soldiers with her scythe. No visible wounds appeared on their bodies—but they collapsed to the ground nonetheless.

The remaining soldiers stood petrified, as if their souls had been siphoned away.

"That's a grim reaper's scythe," Azazel explained. "It doesn't cut—but it reaps your soul. The damage inflicted is proportional to the skill of the wielder. To take down an army of vampires enhanced by the Holy Grail… Well, that says a lot about Bennia's ability."

We, too, had faced similar scythes, when the Hero Faction attacked the underworld and Hades sent a corps of grim reapers to back them up.

"She's at least midlevel. She's definitely faster than the grim reapers I fought after the midlevel demon promotion exam," I remarked.

Those were my honest thoughts. She was clearly more agile than those midlevel grim reapers had been, and her scythe was more deadly, too. It was little wonder, given her parentage.

"Her Knight abilities increase her speed even more," Kiba said, deeply moved. "It's the perfect fit for her. Watch closely, Xenovia."

"…Is that supposed to be a joke?" she fired back, unamused.

Xenovia was fast, too, but there was no mistaking Bennia had an edge over her. When it came to sheer power, though, Xenovia would win hands down.

While the grim reaper cut through the air, Rugal let his coat fall to the floor, his shirt revealing a well-toned physique underneath.

"…My turn," he muttered—and his body began to throb and swell!

His clothes, unable to contain the transformation, strained and tore.

Meanwhile, his mouth elongated, filling with beast-like fangs, claws protruding from his hands, deadly and sharp, while a coat of gray fur emerged all over his flesh.

"Aaauuuggghhh…!"

A bestial roar reverberated through the underground hall.

He sounded just like a wolf! Heck, he *looked* just like a wolf!

Yes—a gray-furred beastman now stood before us! So he was a werewolf all along?!

He jerked his neck, cracking his bones with a series of sharp pops.

"I have to earn my keep in the Sitri Familia."

Seeing him poised and ready, the remaining vampire solders let out audible groans.

"A werewolf?!"

"Ugh! A reincarnated werewolf demon?!"

For some reason, the vampires were aghast, visibly repulsed.

Rias leaned over to explain. "Vampires and werewolves have been at odds with each other since antiquity. They're eternal enemies."

Ah. No wonder the Carmilla vampires hadn't felt comfortable around him. They must have recognized his true nature.

"I'm used to killing vampires. Don't expect any mercy."

A soon as he said that, Rugal took off at high speed, tearing through the soldiers like they were scraps of paper! I remembered hearing somewhere that vampires ranked among the higher classes of beastmen.

"Curse you!"

The vampire soldiers attacked with swords and spears, but perhaps due to his natural sturdiness or the heightened defenses of

his Rook piece, they were unable to inflict any injury. On the contrary, their blades were left chipped and damaged after each attack.

"Rugal is no ordinary werewolf, you know?" Bennia said, unleashing her next attack.

The next moment, an intricate pattern covered Rugal's arms, something like a magic formula. Flames ignited at his fingertips, and he lashed out with a mighty blow!

A fire punch! The vampire soldiers burst into flames, the heat so intense it melted straight through their armor! It was an incredibly potent fire spell!

"He can use magic, too?!" I gawked.

"He's of mixed background. His mom's a famous witch, and his dad comes from a well-known werewolf clan!"

What?! A werewolf who excelled physically, both in offense and defense, *and* was skilled in magic?!

"…You set your sights on an exceptional Rook with him, Sona…," Rias murmured, taken aback by what she was seeing.

Seriously! Rugal let Bennia attack first, but he had already taken out more vampires than she had!

And to think, his Rook piece was enhancing his magic even further! The vampires' attacks were leaving him completely unscathed!

His movements were graceful and swift, just like a wolf's. Bennia followed close behind, quickly dispatching any prey that slipped past his claws.

The Sitri Familia's two new recruits were amazing fighters! No wonder the chairwoman had them in mind for attacking this vampire stronghold!

…I could hear footsteps approaching from behind. The others clearly felt it, too—an ominous aura in the air. Reinforcements!

"Go, Gremory Familia. Leave this lot to me and Bennia," Rugal said as he tore apart another vampire soldier.

"You're sure?" Rias asked.

Bennia nodded, swinging her scythe in a wide arc. *"This is what we're here for. It's the perfect opportunity to show off our abilities*

for the first time while you go after the big guys!"

"Our master wants us to get used to fighting as demons. She's a real-life Spartan."

Despite the occasional slip, they were putting up one heck of a fight! At this rate, the reinforcements coming from upstairs wouldn't stand a chance.

The rest of us nodded to one another, then dashed through the carnage until we reached the stairs leading farther underground!

Just before stepping into the stairwell, Rias turned and looked over her shoulder. "We're counting on you, Bennia, Rugal!"

The Sitri newcomers each responded with a thumbs-up.

It's up to you guys now!

And so we hurried down the stairs…

"…The Sitri group's got an incredible lineup, huh?" Xenovia muttered as we made our way farther down. "They're going to be a huge headache next time we face them in the Rating Game…"

"The game is all about overall balance, so Sona's team already had the upper hand," Azazel said. "You're gonna struggle if your people focus only on firepower, Rias."

"I know," she answered with a sigh. "I've never been one to underestimate Sona."

Exactly. You couldn't afford to sell the chairwoman short. Heck, she had commanded us in addition to her own Familia during the recent mage attack.

Again, the stairs opened up into a cavernous space.

The castle's underground complex consisted of four levels. This was the second one.

Facing us this time—

"Here they come. Just like the boss said."

"Hmm. The Gremory Familia. The one everyone has been talking about."

"Looks like we've finally found worthy opponents."

These vampires clearly outclassed the ones upstairs. They were dressed not in armor but regular clothes, though they carried

themselves like skilled warriors.

"This bunch probably serve the coup plotters directly," Azazel muttered. "They might not be pure-blooded, but their vampire traits are top-notch."

So they were enhanced fighters? Which of us ought to step up this time, then?

"Let's use our Balance Breakers," I said, activating my armor.

I had to be ready. The farther down we went, the greater the danger that awaited us.

"What now? Ah, right. Kiba?"

"What?"

I came out with my plan.

"How about we attack at the same time?"

He broke into an undaunted grin. "How could I refuse? All right. Let's dance—Red Dragon Emperor and my Holy Demon Swords."

The men of the Gremory Familia would handle this!

But just as we stepped forward, ready to go—

"Me first."

"I'm going, too!"

Xenovia and Irina flew right past us! Our Church warriors were intent on taking first blood!

The two rapidly closed in on our foes, their Holy Swords and mass-produced Holy Demon Swords lashing out in all directions!

"Ugh! Holy Swords!"

The first vampire transformed into a cloud of mist, evading the initial strike. But Xenovia and Irina were far from over—sending waves of holy energy surging from the arc their weapons cut in the air!

The next vampire, positioned farther to the back, morphed into a bat, only narrowly escaping.

"Extend!" Xenovia shouted, the Durendal taking on a long whiplike form as it slashed the next vampire off to the side.

"Ngh!"

Unable to dodge in time, the vampire took a direct hit…though it didn't take as much damage as I was expecting.

Vampires, like demons, were highly vulnerable to holy attacks.

The fact the opposing fighter was still standing could only mean the Holy Grail had helped mitigate that weakness.

"Ngh. I mean, that was a light swing, but I thought the Durendal would have a stronger effect on them." Xenovia sighed.

"Still, it's not like they're too strong for us," Irina answered. "If we keep on attacking, we'll be sure to win…! The only problem is getting it over with quickly, right?"

Yes. If there was one thing we had learned from this, it was that those enhanced vampires still weren't a real match for us. The Holy Grail meant they were still troublesome, of course, and we had to be careful not to use overpowered attacks in these enclosed basement levels, but that was all.

"I could stay here and fight… But downstairs…" Kiba looked down, as if trying to peer through the ground beneath his feet.

Right. There was likely an evil dragon up ahead. Possibly Crom Cruach or else the Ophis clone Lilith, protecting Rizevim's back.

I would need Kiba by my side if we had to fight both at once. It was already questionable whether we could win against Crom Cruach, but if we had to fight the Ophis doppelgänger as well…

We couldn't afford to waste our strength here… Yet these underling fighters stood in our way.

While I pondered our best course of action, Koneko stepped forward.

"…Let me handle it here," she said, closing her eyes and catching her breath. "I think I can use the tricks my sister taught me."

The next moment, a soft white light gathered around her, enveloping her body while she exuded her own fierce fighting spirit.

Cloaked in her fierce aura, the light swelled and grew, molding itself into a distinctive shape.

…When finally the light faded—Koneko looked just like Kuroka!

She was dressed in a white kimono, with cat ears and a forked tail!

"I made myself mature fully by harmonizing my natural qi *energy with my fighting spirit,"* the new Koneko said!

Seriously! Th-that was her voice?! I—I was at a loss for words!

"It's a sage arts technique that temporarily matures her body by

drawing on outside energy. It lets her make better use of her *nekomata* powers… She mentioned it while in her Shirone mode," Rias explained.

So she had used sage arts to make herself into a mature lady?! And to top it off, she was in her cat-eared Shirone mode?!

B-but her breasts! They were so huge you could make out their shape even through her kimono! Oooh! She was just like Kuroka, a stunningly mature beauty!

Now in her Shirone mode, Koneko stepped forward silent as a ghost, extended her right hand, and conjured up a great wheel in front of her.

The next moment, the wheel caught fire.

"…Kasha. A nekomata *ability."*

Kasha! I knew that word!

"A kasha is a specter that lures the dead to the afterlife. It's said to be another form *nekomata* cat spirits can adopt," Azazel explained. "For those vampires risen up from the grave, it would probably deal a fatal blow. The question is whether it will still work now that the Holy Grail has bolstered their weaknesses."

Koneko conjured several kasha fire wheels, hurling them at the vampires up ahead at high speed!

"Strange trick! But that's about it!"

The vampires dismissed the attack—yet the kasha wheels evaded their counters, twisting and turning through the air until they had ensnared their targets!

One of them took a direct hit—and was instantly engulfed in searing white flame!

"A-aaarrrggghhh!" he screamed before being reduced to ash.

Whoa! Talk about decisive!

The other vampires were left stupefied.

"Wh-what?! How did that happen?! We're supposed to be immune to flames now!"

Right. That would be a shocking development for any vampire convinced they had eliminated their innate weaknesses.

"It's futile," Koneko said ruthlessly. *"Those flames will keep burning until the dead are completely consumed. My sage arts have*

transformed your natural qi *energy into a purifying force. It isn't a matter of weakness. Unless you can fundamentally reshape the nature of your existence—the truth itself—they'll keep on burning."*

A purifying force.

She had picked this up from her big sister Kuroka?

"…It's basically the opposite to Saji's cursed flames." Azazel groaned. "One curses its target for all of eternity; the other purifies them without end."

Whoa! It kind of made sense, what with how strict she was about perverted behavior!





"Then we'd better attack!" cried one of the vampires, giving up on trying to dodge her strikes as he launched into one of his own.

But the moment his fist made contact with Koneko—he, too, was reduced to ash!

"…I'm the very essence of purification now. Touch me, and you'll go up in flames."

One touch was enough to disintegrate them?! How powerful was that purifying force?!

"Wh-whoa…" I swallowed nervously.

"You'd better not touch her, either—got that?" Azazel warned me. "It could purify you as well. It'll work against anyone with negative thoughts. Probably even an evil dragon. Of course, the potency will depend on Koneko's own strength… Those vampires won't stand a chance, though, even with their enhancements."

Just as he said, her kasha wheels continued to soar through the room, steadily claiming the vampires' souls one by one.

"Damn yooouuu!" the last one screamed as he burst into flame.

Koneko eliminated every last enhanced vampire warrior all by herself!

After checking to make sure she hadn't missed any of them, she breathed a sigh, a hint of exhaustion creeping into her features.

"That was amazing, Koneko!" I ran over to her, but I stopped just short of her light-covered frame. "Ah, right. I can't give you a hug, can I…?"

Koneko fidgeted slightly, her cheeks turning a rosy red. *"Issei… I'm a big girl now."*

"Y-yeah… You've definitely grown."

She wasn't just taller—her breasts were filled out, too! Whoa! I never knew she would develop so stunningly! I could hardly contain my excitement!

She looked up at me with her large innocent eyes. *"I can't maintain this state for long… But one day, I'll be like this. And then I'll be your wife…"*

With that, the light surrounding her abruptly faded, and she reverted to her original petite form, collapsing to the ground in exhaustion.

"…Phew."

"Good work, Koneko," Rias said, cradling her in her arms and stroking her head before she lost consciousness.

It looked like she had some incredible growth on the horizon. And that purifying force? With more training, she would be able to start laying evil dragons low.

"This was her first real battle in that state. She must have exhausted her energy in one go," Azazel observed.

But thanks to her, we could now slip through to the next level.

And so I cradled her in my arms as we headed farther down.

-○●○-

"—."

We sensed it just before reaching the next level—a familiar aura wafting up from below…

It was a wicked, evil feeling, heavy, clinging to the skin like a shroud.

When we opened the door into the third underground floor, we were met with laughter echoing through the vast hall.

"Gwa-ha-ha-ha! It's been a while, Ddraig!"

Black scales. Silver eyes. It was a colossal dragon!

"Grendel!"

Yep, it was the same evil dragon we had faced during the mage attack!

"That's right! It's me! And I'm dying to kill you all!" he roared, waves of pure malice emanating from every inch of his being. *"I'm here to pick up where we left off! Gwa-ha-ha-ha! Let's go!"*

…This was one guy I had hoped I would never have to bump into again!

But if we were going to have to fight him, I would need my armor. My only chance was a promotion!

"Don't promote to your True Queen form yet, Issei," Rias said, stopping me before I could activate it.

"But you know how strong he is! I can't go head-to-head with

him without it!"

"You need to save your strength for Crom Cruach and Rizevim Livan Lucifer. I'm sure they're waiting farther ahead… We're going to have to face this dragon as a team."

…I had to admit, I wasn't expecting this guy. Sure, I knew the Khaos Brigade had teamed up with Marius's vampires, but with Crom Cruach and Lilith here, I figured he would be off doing something else.

I *should* have anticipated this. After all, this insane dragon lived only for battle. It wasn't all that surprising he would pop up in a place embroiled in war.

Rias signaled to the rest of us with her eyes.

…So we were doing this as a team. We would all have to get involved. If we didn't, there was no way we could win!

"Jet!"

I was the first to leap into action. Spreading my dragon wings wide, I shot forward at breakneck speed.

"Gwa-ha-ha-ha! That's it! Come at me, straightforward and stupid!" Grendel chortled in delight.

One of the others matched my speed, coming up beside me—Kiba, already deploying several dragon knights, each wielding the Demon Swords he had taken from Siegfried!

Kiba thrust his right hand into a subspace fold, pulling out a fearsome dragon-slaying sword—the Demonic Emperor Sword, Gram!

This was the most powerful dragon-slaying weapon there was! My Ascalon might not have had much of an impact on Grendel, but what about the Gram?

Xenovia and Irina rushed to follow us—a simultaneous four-way attack!

"Aaahhh!"

"Take thiiisss!"

The two of them swung the Durendal and their mass-produced Holy Demon Swords, and yet—

"Too easy!" Grendel laughed.

They inflicted only superficial damage!

"…You're saying I'm going to need to use the Durendal's aura…?!" Xenovia gritted her teeth, seething at the fact her attack had failed to land.

But it was by no means weak. No, Grendel's defenses were off the charts! In fact—

"How about this?!"

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

Even after I smashed him in the face with a turbocharged punch, he just shrugged it off. Not even my Balance Breaker was capable of making a dent!

"Haaah!"

Irina spread her angelic wings wide and fired a beam of holy light from her fingertips, sending the torrent flying straight at the dragon!

"Gwa-ha-ha-ha! Is that all you can manage?!"

All she had done was sear Grendel's skin.

Each of them was an incredibly potent attack, but he weathered them all!

Seizing his chance while the dragon was distracted, Kiba lashed out with the Gram!

"Eat this!"

Weapons shrouded in demonic energy swung down, Kiba's dragon knights following his attack to join the fray with their own strikes!

Their enchanted blades tore through the evil dragon while Kiba slashed diagonally from shoulder to hip with the Gram. And yet—

What should have been fatal wounds simply failed to materialize. Blue blood gushed from across Grendel's body while smoke rose up from the cuts—but far from falling down, he flashed them a defiant grin.

"—! The Gram should have inflicted more damage?!" Kiba, the sword's wielder, was taken aback.

Grendel let out a sinister laugh. *"Gwa-ha-ha-ha! That hurt! You're good, little swordsman!"*

"…I can't believe it. I know I haven't fully mastered it yet, but it's a renowned Dragon Slayer. It should have done more than that…,"

Kiba muttered, doing his best to put on a brave face.

"That bastard's just too stubborn. Looks like I'm going to have to use my True Queen after all…," I said, when—

A volley of magical arrows, imbued with every elemental attribute imaginable, flew straight for the evil dragon.

Following their aim, I spotted Rossweisse deploying several layers of magic squares in the air.

…But her attacks didn't go very far, either.

"He's immune to elemental magic… Even with high magic defenses, that's *too* excessive. He must have been enhanced beyond his natural resistance."

Rossweisse was no doubt on the mark with that guess. Grendel's scales were just too tough!

The fact he could knock me down even in my True Queen state was proof his stats were off the chart.

"…I know we're keeping Issei in reserve, but none of us are able to get through," Xenovia grumbled, just as stunned as the rest of us.

Irina breathed a sigh. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll be of much use against something as formidable as *that*. At best, I might be able to catch his attention. Though it looks like it's only interested in Issei…"

Yep, that damn dragon was obsessed, his ferocious eyes glaring right at me.

"What's the matter, Ddraig?! Show me what you've got! Where's your crimson armor?! You can't possibly face me without it!"

…He wanted me to enter my True Queen state. Well, I didn't see many alternatives…

With the margins as slim as they were, I had to step up—then open a path for us all to beat a strategic retreat!

Just as I steeled myself for the inevitable, Rias spoke up. "There's only one move I know that could prove lethal to that dragon."

"You're really planning to use it, Rias?" Akeno asked.

"Yes. I don't see any other way. But it will take time. We'll have a better chance of succeeding if we can buy enough time to mass my power."

Was that the huge sphere of raw destructive energy I had

witnessed during our training sessions? It certainly did pack one heck of a punch!

If it scored a direct hit, it very well might tear through Grendel's defenses to deliver a killing blow!

"That should make short work of him, Rias," I answered.

"Yes," Kiba said, appearing beside me. "I can buy you a few minutes."

"Yep. If the prez has a secret plan in stock, let's go with it! We can't afford to dawdle up here," Xenovia added.

"You can do it, Rias!" Irina chimed in.

"Very well. I'm counting on you all, everyone," Rias answered, activating a magic square beneath her feet as she started molding her demonic energy.

The next moment, destructive energy started gathering above her head. With enough time to charge, it would develop into a massive sphere.

All right! We just needed to delay our foe for long enough to let that happen!

"I've set up a barrier to protect Asia, Gasper, and Koneko, so I guess it's time for me to join the fray," Azazel said, taking off his jacket and lining up beside us.

Once our frontline members were ready, Xenovia and Irina launched a flanking attack from left and right, while I charged in head-on! Kiba sliced through the shadows, and when she spotted an opening, Rossweisse unleashed a flurry of elemental spells!

"Awesome! Gwa-ha-ha-haaa! Bring it on!"

Grendel welcomed our assault, moving impossibly fast for a creature with such a massive frame! He took Rossweisse's spells head-on, then effortlessly swatted aside Xenovia's and Irina's attacks. Kiba aimed for his legs, but Grendel simply jumped into the air and spat a volley of flames back at him!

"Gah!" Kiba cleaved the fire in half with the Gram.

Meanwhile, I glided down to the floor, scooped up Kiba, and retreated to where Xenovia and Irina were waiting.

The second I landed, I tapped Kiba and Xenovia on the shoulders to transfer my boosted power to them.

"Kiba! Xenovia! Use this!"

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

"Transfer!"

Receiving the transfer, Kiba's and Xenovia's auras surged!

"All right. This will do!"

"Let's go! Excalibur Rapid!"

The two of them tightened their grips on their weapons and charged at Grendel!

Kiba was wielding a Holy Demon Sword together with the Gram, while Xenovia clutched the Ex-Durendal. In a split second, they completely vanished, leaving only the sound of the wind in their wake! They were so fast not even I could keep up with them!

"Hah! You're fast! Stupid fast!"

Their movements put them beyond Grendel's reach, his punches not even coming close to landing. They continued to slice through him, their attacks eerily silent.

Wounds began to pile up on the dragon's black scales. In terms of speed and number of moves, Kiba and Xenovia clearly had the advantage. One wrong step, however, and Grendel's claws could spell immediate defeat for either.

All the same, their unwavering speed meant the dragon kept on failing to find his mark.

Xenovia was able to keep pace with Kiba thanks to the powers of the Excalibur Rapid, heightened by the energy I had transferred to her. She was so fast, no one could possibly interrupt her dance!

I had absolute faith in them! There was no way Grendel would be able to take them out!

"…Ngh! What the hell…?! I can't hit you! I can't even reach you!"

As expected, even the mighty evil dragon was distressed in the face of their relentless assault.

Smoke was starting to rise from the wounds crisscrossing his body. Could it be that all those attacks, piling up nonstop, were finally beginning to wear him down…? Was there a limit to his resistance after all?

Grendel clicked his tongue in frustration, then leaped backward,

his abdomen swelling! He was going to unleash his fire breath again! Had he given up on using pinpoint attacks in lieu of a wide-ranging assault?!

Kiba and Xenovia lined up next to each other, raising the Gram and the Durendal up high.

"Let's do this, Xenovia."

"Yeah. Times like this call for raw power!"

The auras of the Demonic Emperor Sword, Gram, and the Ex-Durendal combined, flaring high overhead!

Then, as Grendel unleashed his fiery burst, the two warriors swung their weapons with perfect timing!

That colossal wave of energy collided with the evil dragon's massive fireball, causing the air to writhe like a thing alive as a violent shock wave spread through the hall.

Then their combined auras brushed Grendel's flames aside and hit him head-on, consuming him whole!

"Aaauuuggghhh!"

Grendel's howl filled the air, but the Gram and the Ex-Durendal weren't finished! For an ordinary foe, this would mean instant death. But Grendel was no ordinary enemy.

Once the combined power of those legendary swords died down, Grendel's frame was billowing smoke.

…But he was still standing!

Blue blood gushed from his broken flesh, but he didn't show any sign of surrendering. Or so I thought, when—

With a heavy thud, he fell to his knees.

It *was* working! Kiba's and Xenovia's combined attack had hit its mark! That was no small feat!

"Get out of the way!" Akeno called.

We all did as instructed—when three dragon-shaped lightning bolts shot past, striking the kneeling Grendel with a torrent of electricity!

"Aaauuuggghhh!" he roared.

Once the lightning ceased, a thick plume of smoke drifted up from Grendel's gaping maw.

The corners of his mouth were twisted in an unsettling grin.

"…Gwa-ha-ha-ha! That's the stuff! I haven't felt this numb and battered in an eternity! Dammit, this is awesome!"

He was covered in wounds and burnt to a crisp, but he still rose back to his feet with a laugh!

We watched on in horror, every last one of us!

"…He can still fight after all that…?"

"…He's enjoying it. How can he keep on laughing death in the face…?"

"…No wonder everyone said we should steer clear of him."

Kiba, Xenovia, and Akeno were aghast at Grendel's unnatural obsession with fighting! We were all but killing him, and he was still loving it! How were we supposed to keep up with someone like that?!

"You might as well take this, too," Azazel said, conjuring an oversize spear of light and hurling it into Grendel's abdomen.

"Gah! Come at meee!"

Grendel stood ready to take the blow head-on—but just before the spear could reach him, it shattered into countless tiny arrows, raining down on him in a dazzling assault!

Whoa! A shape-shifting spear of light! That was the former governor of the Grigori for you—he wasn't hurling just any old spear!

"Tch! You've got some cheek, fallen angel!" Grendel snarled.

Though he was badly injured, fierce defiance remained etched across his face.

The ferocious battle continued for the next few minutes, our every attack finding its mark! Grendel, however, showed no sign of backing down, still sending overpowered punches, kicks, and blasts of fire at us all.

"Sturdy Shield!"

"Defensive Wall!"

Rossweisse and Akeno erected barriers with their defensive magic, boosted thanks to their Rook power-ups.

"Guard, guard, guard! You're making this too boring! But you need to be faster than that!" Grendel barked, launching himself at us with a speed second only to Kiba and Azazel.

Time and again, we were thrown against the floor and walls!

"Restore!"

Asia's healing magic reached us in the nick of time. But while she could heal our injuries, there was no restoring our lost energy. With each blow, our mental and physical stamina was being chipped away.

As a team, protracted battles were our weakness! Unless we could land a decisive blow, our opponent would push through!

Seriously! Grendel didn't care about taking damage! Unless we completely obliterated him, he would just keep pulling himself back up!

If Azazel and I could go all out, we might be able to manage… But if we exhausted ourselves now, it would only lead to more problems later. Then again, if we got ourselves killed here, none of that would matter…!

Azazel raced ahead, taking advantage of a momentary opening… but Grendel unleashed a wide arc of roiling flames and lashed out with his tail!

"I'll take an eye, at least," Azazel muttered, seizing his chance to plunge a spear of light into Grendel's left eye.

"Gah! Aaauuuggghhh!"

Blue blood spewed from his ruptured eyeball! I thought this might be enough to make him finally lose his temper, but he just fixed us with a maniacal grin.

"All right! That's the stuff! What's the point of a smash-and-grab if you aren't willing to take a hit?! Good, good! This is a killer fight! Don't act sorry if one or two of you bite the dust, you little punks! Nggghhh!"

…Despite losing an eye, he was practically buzzing with energy!

Honestly, the more damage he took, the more relentless his attacks became! It was exhausting!

While I contemplated my next move—

"Thank you. That's enough. We're ready."

It was Rias.

I glanced over my shoulder—and spotted her wielding a massive orb of pure destruction.

She walked past us with a sigh, the sphere hovering above her

head. "I'm tired of facing opponents immune to my attacks. But I can't keep putting on a poor show in front of my Familia members, can I? So I've come up with my own special move."

"Fall back, everyone!" Akeno called out. "Behind Rias!"

We backed away as quickly as we could, so none of us were in her line of fire.

"Take this!" she shouted, unleashing that formidable sphere of raw power.

It flew forward slowly, almost painfully so. But it was so potent that it damaged the floor with every inch it traversed.

"Hmm? What the hell is that? It's too damn slow!" Grendel snorted.

And yet…

The sphere began to pulsate, crimson and black magic swirling inside it.

…I watched closely, unsure what kind of effect it would have—when I noticed Grendel's massive form being drawn in.

The evil dragon struggled, trying to resist—but his efforts were in vain, leaving him stumbling like a marionette on unsteady strings.

He dropped to his knees…but his body kept being dragged to the orb.

"…Guh?! I'm being pulled in?!"

Before long, his skin made contact with the sphere—and his black armored scales shattered!

"Gaaauuuggghhh!" he screamed, the sphere of destruction tearing him apart without mercy!

—! Wh-whoa! Grendel was literally disintegrating!

"Tch!"

Tongue lashing, he spread his wings and tried to flee—but Akeno's dragon lightning brought him low once again!

"Gaaauuuggghhh!" he wailed, his body crumbling away.

Akeno spread her fallen angel wings, a sadistic smile playing at her lips. "Oh dear. You're not just going to let yourself get obliterated, are you?"

Rias brushed a hand through her crimson hair. "My demonic energy has transformed, thanks to Issei. I call that move my

Extinguish Star. It's a force capable of obliterating anything and everything, without regard for resistance or defense… So prepare to be extinguished!"

With that, the huge sphere grew even brighter, enveloping the evil dragon within its glow.

What remained once the destructive orb died away—was Grendel, reduced to just half his head.

Terrifyingly, he was still alive, even after losing his body! And the leftover part of his head still wore a disturbing grin!

"…I see. That damn Euclid was right. The Bael family's magic is strong enough to destroy the souls of evil dragons. Ha! Now that hit hard!" He erupted into a roar of laughter. *"Gwa-ha-ha-ha! But so what?! As long as my soul is safe and sound, I can get a new body whenever I want! That Holy Grail works miracles!"*

…He could get another body? Seriously? Were we supposed to destroy him all the way down to his soul or something…?

—.

That was when it hit me. Right. I, too, had been reduced to nothing but a soul in the dimensional void, only returning after I had found a new body. So the Holy Grail could do the same thing…?

Even in his sorry state, Grendel bared his fangs in a defiant sneer. *"This might not be so bad! You could even say this is where my real work begins! How about I kill as many of you as I can before I disappear?! Gwa-ha-ha-ha!"*

"…!"

We were all seized with terror at his unrelenting spirit.

He *still* wanted to fight us, even like that…?! This went beyond crazy! He was completely insane!

Rias stepped forward, concentrating more destructive demonic energy at her fingertips.

"We really don't want to have to keep fighting like this. Evil beings like you should be wiped from existence. With my current powers, I could reduce you to your very soul. I might not be able to erase you completely, but I can make sure you won't be revived

again any time soon."

But just before she could unleash the killing blow—

A figure stepped forward.

We all spun around at this new presence.

…It was a man clad in black—Crom Cruach, the strongest evil dragon.

"Grendel," he said as he approached. "Withdraw."

Grendel couldn't fail to notice the man's presence. "*—! The hell?! It's you, Crom?! Tch! I was going to see how far I can go like this! You're gonna get in my way?!*"

"You won't last long like that. Hurry up and switch to a new body."

"*Shut the hell up! I'm in the middle of killing these twerps! It's a life-and-death slugfest! And it's finally getting interesting! Nggghhh!*" Grendel spat in challenge, despite having no more than half a head.

Crom Cruach fixed him with a piercing glare. "You'll have to beat me first if you want to assert your will… How about it? Are you game? I don't care either way."

"*…*" Even the mighty Grendel shrank back at Crom Cruach's overwhelming presence.

It took him a brief moment to collect his thoughts.

"*Tch. I'm not looking to get into a fight with you. If we're going to throw it down, I wanna be at my best. Fine. I'll switch out.*"

…For Grendel to do as Crom Cruach told him… If that wasn't proof of the latter's power and strength, I didn't know what was.

—.

The man vanished, leaving us looking around in surprise. Somehow, Crom Cruach had moved beside Grendel without us even noticing.

He snapped his fingers, a teleportation square unfolding beneath them both.

They were trying to escape!

Determined not to let them slip away, Xenovia unleashed her Holy Sword's aura at them, only for it to be blocked by Crom Cruach.

"*Hey, you little brats!*" Grendel barked as the light of the magic square faded away. "*You're out of luck. You won't stand a chance*

against old Crom. But hey, if you do *survive, let's duke it out again sometime. Gwa-ha-ha-ha!"*

With those parting words, he disappeared into the teleportation square.

"I can't let you proceed any further," Crom Cruach said.

…We braced ourselves. This time, I was going to have to enter my True Queen state. Something told me I wouldn't stand a chance without it!

I was just about to activate it when another powerful presence made its way into the underground chamber!

"—! Here it comes, partner!" Ddraig called out.

Whatever it was, it rushed down at tremendous speed, smashing the door open as it burst in!

A flash of light streaked across the hall, stopping abruptly beside me.

It was Vali, already suited up in his armor!

"So you're Crom Cruach?" he said, casting his gaze at our opponent.

"Ah. Well met, White Dragon Emperor."

The two glared at one another in silence, a dangerous, battle-ready aura emanating from each.

"Vali!" Azazel called out. "You're a little late, aren't you? What gives? You left the Carmilla territory ahead of us!"

Right. I had heard Vali was here before our arrival. I was wondering why he hadn't shown up yet.

"A lot happened," he answered. "We were interrupted on the way. By Euclid Lucifugus."

—!

Euclid Lucifugus! Was that why Vali was delayed, because he was fighting him?!

"What about Bikou and the others?" Azazel asked.

"…What was that stray mage group called again? Hexennacht? They got caught by the witch with the True Cross, so they're dealing with her right now."

"You're saying the Khaos Brigade has the True Cross as well…? So the Khaos Brigade has all the biblical God's holy relic Longinuses…?!"

Azazel spat bitterly.

…Was Hexennacht's True Cross user collaborating with the terrorists?! The Holy Spear, the Holy Grail, and the True Cross were all being misused?!

…If we could get our hands on just one of them…! There was no way I was letting the Holy Grail slip away!

"Issei Hyoudou," Vali said, turning to me. "Are you confident you can beat Crom Cruach?"

"Judging from his aura, he looks ridiculously strong…"

"Right now, he's probably head and shoulders better than you are."

Yeah, yeah, all right. This guy sure knew how to get under my skin, putting it like that.

"I'd like to say I'd have a better chance of winning, but something tells me I don't."

…Now this was unusual. He was showing a little humility. It just went to show how powerful this humanoid dragon really was.

"…Also, I have business with someone who I think is waiting ahead," Vali continued. "I need to conserve my strength as much as possible… I know I've been chasing this dragon, but that's that, and this is this. I need to face this guy. So what now?"

He didn't want to exhaust himself, either? Basically, his target here wasn't Crom Cruach, but Rizevim? He sure seemed to hold a grudge against his grandfather there.

But I could see what he was hinting at.

"You want to team up?"

"You'd rather not?"

"No. I'm fine with it. We've been struggling a little trying to help Gaspy's friend. To be honest, I don't want to waste my strength fighting this guy, either."

Frankly, I *didn't* want to have to fight an evil dragon at all. Nothing beat peace. Facing off against an opponent like that, I risked the destruction of my body all over again.

And I couldn't afford to lose my body before I had a chance to sleep with Rias…and Akeno, Xenovia, Irina, and the others!

Unaware of my thoughts, Vali let out a low chuckle. "Looks like

we've got a deal. Hmm. We haven't fought together since we took on Loki, have we?"

Ah, right. We hadn't teamed up for a while.

"…If you two can't handle him, then we're out of options," Azazel said. "Rias, you guys should try to recover your strength for the next fight. Leave this to the Two Heavenly Dragons. We'll have to rely on them here."

"…I wish I could fight with you, but I'll need to take a break before I can use that last move again," Rias said with a sullen nod. "Then again, our support would probably just be a hindrance if you two started going on a rampage."

With that decided, I started chanting my invocation. This was the moment of truth!

"Awakening, I, the Red Dragon Emperor, speak this truth unto the Heavens! I embrace infinite hope and immortal dreams, to become the Crimson Dragon Dynast."

"I shall lead you down the crimson way of the primordial!"

With that, my armor blazed a brilliant crimson, renewed power surging up inside me.

All right! Now I was all set! I could go all out against Crom Cruach!

…Wasn't Vali going to equip his silver-white armor? Though I had heard it wore him out much quicker than mine did. Maybe he was hoping to save it for Rizevim?

"…Sorry, Issei Hyoudou. I can't use my Empireo Juggernaut Overdrive. I already depleted my stamina just before."

—! Seriously?! He had already used his strength before getting here?!

…W-was his fight with Euclid really so difficult…?

"Well, we'll just need to find another way to fend off Crom Cruach."

…Vali might be brimming with confidence, but I could feel anxiety creeping in.

Still, there were two Heavenly Dragons here, and I was sure we had both improved since our battle with Loki!

Crom Cruach watched on, chuckling in amusement from the sidelines. "Interesting. The Two Heavenly Dragons, always at each other's throats, are fighting me together. An opportunity like this might never come again… I suppose I'll have to indulge myself a little."

With that, his aura flared… He was ready for combat.

Without wasting another second, I leaped forward, gliding in a zigzag motion before unleashing a kick from the side!

"How about this?!" I shouted, boosting the strength of my kick—but the humanoid dragon stepped to the side to dodge it, then retaliated with a punch straight into my back!

"Gah…!"

Even through my crimson armor, the strike was more than enough to send me crashing to the floor!

…I didn't seem to have suffered too much damage, but that was just a light punch with his bare hands! Was this guy for real?!

Meanwhile, Vali had slipped behind him, deploying a magic square at his fingertips.

"Take this…"

He proceeded to unleash an enormous bombardment of demonic energy!

Crom Cruach conjured gigantic dragon wings from his back, using them to shield himself against the rain of projectiles.

But that didn't stop Vali's attack from hitting his wings! For any ordinary opponent, that would mean certain death! The barrage was that powerful!

When the dust settled, we found that the winged Crom Cruach took the full brunt of that assault head-on—and from the looks of it, wasn't the least bit worse for wear…

"Well, well," Vali quipped.

Time for plan B!

"Vali! I have an idea. Back me up so I can land my next attack."

"Oh? This sounds like fun," he said with a nod, leaping forward and closing the distance to our foe in the blink of an eye as he

launched into a savage display of attacks and parries.

I hovered just above the floor, aiming the cannon stored in my left wing at my opponent while transferring power into the Ascalon tucked away in my left gauntlet. Then having amplified my dragon-slaying aura, I transferred it into the cannon!

A Crimson Blaster imbued with a dragon-slaying aura! It was just a single cannon for now, but it was time to see how far we could go with it!

I originally devised this technique, drawing on the unique properties of my True Queen promotion, as a countermeasure against Grendel. The idea was to obliterate that weirdly sturdy dragon with it! I needed to concentrate and make sure my aim was absolutely perfect to keep from destroying the castle's underground levels.

Meanwhile, Vali fired a demonic projectile of his own, which Crom Cruach effortlessly deflected to one side.

Unexpectedly, however, it arced around as if it had a will of its own, soaring straight for the humanoid dragon's blind spot! Was Vali controlling the projectile remotely? Impressive!

But even that was no match for Crom Cruach, who sent it flying with a roundhouse kick! But that didn't matter, because this was my chance! Having deflected Vali's attack, he had left himself off-balance!

I gripped the cannon with my left hand, channeling the built-up energy into the barrel!

"Crimson Blaster plus Ascalon!"

"Fang Blast Booster!"

A concentrated crimson aura burst forth, shooting straight for my opponent!

If this didn't hurt him, I had no idea what would!

Once again, Crom Cruach enveloped himself in his massive wings!

The next moment, my Crimson Blaster struck true, the relentless bombardment swallowing him whole!

When at last the blinding light faded…

He was still standing, albeit with one wing blown off at the base! On closer inspection, I could see red smoke rising from the right half

of his body, his skin peeling away to reveal his jet-black scales underneath.

Half his face had likewise been stripped bare, revealing a golden dragon eye—dauntingly inhuman—and two rows of razor-sharp fangs.

…So all that attack had done was tear off a wing and destroy his fake human skin…? No, that was probably a major loss for him.

Thank goodness. The strategy I had come up with for facing Grendel was actually somewhat effective.

With this, I would definitely be able to damage him the next time we met.

…But this brief exchange had made one thing clear—Crom Cruach was on a completely different level.

Sure, I had only used one of my Crimson Blasters, but he had taken a turbocharged Dragon Slayer head-on without so much as flinching…

Vali was right. He was beyond me, at least for now. There was no way I could beat him alone, especially if he had been free to dodge that last attack.

"Putting the Red Dragon Emperor aside, I can't help but notice the White Dragon Emperor has yet to unleash his full power…?" Crom Cruach said, cracking his neck. "Why not…? Or is it that you can't? You mentioned just a moment ago your reluctance to exhaust yourself."

"How about *you* reveal your true form?" I said, poking a finger at him. "I thought you were meant to be a massive dragon?"

Yes, I was sure of it—he was simply disguising himself in that human body. His true form was no doubt that of a giant dragon, probably on the scale of Grendel or Tannin.

Crom Cruach let out a dismissive snort. "Is there much difference in strength between my original form and this human body? Not quite. But it does give me more flexibility. Though I'll admit, my original form is more intimidating… That was a good attack. But it won't be enough to break through the defense of the Crescent Circle Dragon."

…I could see that for myself. People considered me a power-

obsessed numbskull, but even I wasn't strong enough to break through his defenses. Just how much firepower would I need to fight him on equal terms?

"They say the Christian faith's intervention in the human world caused people to lose their original beliefs, triggering the downfall of creatures like this. But I didn't realize the Holy Grail could bring them back with enhanced abilities," Vali said.

Crom Cruach broke into a dubious frown. "Our downfall? No. The other evil dragons may have been destroyed, but not me. Not ever. Though it's true I left these lands for a time due to those meddlesome Christians."

This time, Vali tilted his head to one side in confusion. "You were never destroyed? Then what have you been doing all this time? You're saying you withstood that last attack *without* any enhancements?"

"I've been traveling the human realm and the underworld, training and observing," Crom Cruach answered without evasion.

"—. You're telling me you've been honing your skills and knowledge under everyone's noses?!" Vali exclaimed, genuinely taken aback. Within moments, however, he burst into laughter. "Heh-heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha! I see. No wonder people call you the master of battle. You relish conflict even more than I do, and you've been seeking it out for eons! The only reason you're with Rizevim is for a chance to fight strong enemies, isn't it?"

The edges of Crom Cruach's lips twisted in a smile. "I want to see just how far we dragons can go."

"You're just like me. I'm increasingly intrigued with you, Crom Cruach."

…They were birds of a feather, huh? Battle-crazed maniacs… Did that mean he wasn't interested in women, either? Ugh! I couldn't stand it!

Why did I have to keep getting caught up with people like this?! All I wanted was to catch a break and live happily with the girls from the Occult Research Club! That was it!

Well, putting that aside for the moment…

If this dragon had never been destroyed and if he hadn't been

enhanced by the Holy Grail, did that mean he'd withstood my previous dragon-slaying attack through sheer grit?

"Partner," Ddraig spoke directly into my mind. *"That's the most you can do against him, even with your crimson armor. He's no doubt honed his skills during his time in the human realm and the underworld, even after Albion and I were locked away in our Sacred Gears. I can't begin to measure his prowess as he is now. He didn't perish and come back to life—he's spent these longs years improving himself. He could well have risen to the level of a Heavenly Dragon by now. It would be unwise to fight him."*

That was all well and good, but we wouldn't be able to move to the bottom floor without taking him down…

Dammit… Maybe we should combine our strength after all. I hoped Vali could be persuaded to go all out, but part of me questioned whether he would even listen to me…

At that moment, everyone else started speaking up beside me.

"So Issei and Vali can't cut it?"

"It looks that way, Xenovia. If push comes to shove, we'll have to join in, too!"

"Of course, Irina."

The two of them remained undeterred after fighting Grendel, ready for whatever came next.

"…Is this exhaustion a consequence of me using Gram in combat? But if I can't handle it properly…" Kiba's breathing was ragged, his hands trembling. Blood trickled down from his nose.

The Demonic Emperor Sword was already taking a toll on him! There was no way I could force him to keep on going!

I had hoped Vali and I could distract Crom Cruach long enough to let the others slip past, but he was even more formidable an opponent than Grendel, his attention focused on every last one of us in the hall.

"I can't believe it. Not even Issei and Vali can stop him…," Asia said, her voice laced with worry.

"Tch! We can't afford to stay here forever, Asia!" Azazel shouted as he grabbed her by the shoulder.

"I—I know!"

"You need to call Fafnir! He's our last resort!"

—! F-Fafnir?! Was that panties-obsessed weirdo really going to be able to help here?!

"R-right! I—I understand!" Asia answered, quickly activating a golden magic square—a Dragon Gate.

"Answer my call, O Golden King. Creep upon the earth and receive my offering. Come out! Gigantis Dragon Fafnir!" she chanted, the magic square growing increasingly brighter.

When the light flooded over finally, a huge dragon adorned in golden scales broke forth.

"…It's panties time?"

Those were the first words to come out of his mouth…

Seriously? I could feel my composure slipping already.

"N-no… Um, y-yes! Exactly! Panties time!" Asia tried to refute him at first but quickly changed positions!

"…What just happened?" Vali asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"D-don't worry about it, Vali!" I insisted, hoping to keep him from delving too deeply.

"Block your ears, Albion! It will doom you to hear this!" Ddraig cried out in warning.

"Wh-what do you mean, Red…? N-not breasts again, surely?! Hah, hah… Th-the pain…"

Albion was practically hyperventilating there! He was having a rough time of it lately!

"N-no, this is a different kind of horror… Fafnir is no longer the dragon we used to know!"

Right, so Fafnir wasn't always like this!

"Fafnir!" Azazel called out. "I gave you some gifts when we made our pact, remember? One of them was a replica of the enchanted stone Tathlum! Use it now! Crom Cruach is from the same mythos, so it should work on him!"

A contracted item, huh? I remembered him saying once how he had given Fafnir a bunch of gifts in exchange for that pact. If one of them had an advantage over Crom Cruach, that would be a huge help!

"Okay. But there's something I want."

"Panties, right? Asia, hand them over! If it means using the Tathlum, they're a small price to pay! I had to hand over a huge chunk of my collection for my pact, and he's letting you use them for a single piece of underwear!"

"R-right!" Asia rummaged through her pouch, pulling out a pair of panties.

But no sooner did Fafnir lay eyes on them than he puffed his cheeks out in disapproval.

What?! Seriously?! I thought he was obsessed with her underwear?!

"…No. I'm not in the mood for panties today."

That reaction left us all so shocked, our eyes nearly popped out in disbelief!

He wasn't in the mood for panties?!

"Seriously?! Th-then what *do* you want?! Asia's bra?!" Azazel gawked, more shocked than the rest of us combined. He clearly hadn't been expecting this development!

"W-wait, Azazel! Asia isn't some lingerie shop! You can't just force her to give away her panties and bras like pieces of candy!" Rias protested.

"That's right! What do you think a maiden's underwear is for?!" Akeno added.

Ah, the sisterly bond those three shared was undeniably strong!

But at that moment, an idea struck me!

"No, Teach! I think I've got it! If I were Fafnir, I'd want freshly removed panties!"

That was it, wasn't it?! He wanted the panties she was wearing right now!

"I want li'l Asia's swimsuit."

…

S-so that was how it was… I didn't see that coming. How could he be such a pervert? Honestly, I wished this twisted Dragon King would just bite the dust!

But this wasn't a beach or a public pool! We were in a vampire lair, for crying out loud! What made him think she would have brought her swimsuit here?!

"How stupid are you?!" I fired back. "Why would she have brought her swimsuit to a place like—"

"I have it!" Asia shouted tearfully. "I brought it with meee!" With that, she pulled a school-issue swimsuit from her pouch, embroidered with her name in cute hiragana characters! It was the same swimsuit she had worn the day we inaugurated our own pool!

"What?!"

We were taken aback, every last one of us! What on earth was that doing here?!

"Why, Asia?!" Xenovia demanded as she grabbed her by the shoulders. "Were you planning to go for a swim or something?!"

"…Chairwoman Sona told me I might need it," she answered in a sad voice. "'*Fafnir may well set his eyes on your swimsuit as his next treasure,'* she said. *'I saw that golden dragon staring at you in the pool earlier. It's clear he wants it more than anything else… So take it with you. I'm sure it will come in handy.'"*

Was that when he jokingly said he would drink the water she was soaking in after she got out?

So that smut-minded Dragon King had been yearning after her swimsuit all this time?!

And Chairwoman Sona had recognized his thoughts for what they were!

"…That's Sona for you!" Rias growled in frustration. "To think she read so far ahead…! How am I ever going to beat her?!"

"Impressive, Chairwoman Sona!" Xenovia exclaimed beside her. "What calm and sound advice!"

"She's so insightful! I really admire her!" Irina added, overwhelmed with emotion.

What the heck? This was just too awful! Did any of them realize we were in the middle of a battle against a legendary evil dragon?!

"You're going for a swim, Fafnir?" Crom Cruach asked.

He clearly misunderstood this at a very deep level!

"I don't know what to think." Rossweisse heaved a sigh. "It's just too cruel."

She could say that again…

"I'll give them to you!" Asia shouted, presenting her swimsuit as

an offering.

Fafnir leaned in, his nostrils flaring…

"Li'l Asia's swimsuit! Yummy!"

Like that, he started eating it!

"So smooth and refreshing."

I was done with this Dragon King! Someone, give me a Dragon Slayer I could use against him!

"Panties…," Albion muttered deliriously. *"Panties… Butts… Asses… I—I'm no Ass Dragon Emperor…!"*

"Pull yourself together! Stay strong, White!" Ddraig shouted, striving to help him keep his sanity intact.

"Listen to me, Ddraig," Albion said in a hoarse voice. *"I know this probably isn't the best time to bring this up, but still…"*

"What is it, Albion?"

"You're not the only who suffers because of that Breast Dragon. I, too, carry the burden."

"—! Ugh! White! Y-you know what it's like…?!"

Huh? Even Ddraig was breaking down into tears…

"Of course I know! Why should we, the Two Heavenly Dragons, be tormented by breasts and buttocks? There was a time when I resented you and Issei Hyoudou, but I don't think he or Vali are to blame… Perhaps the spirit of the age itself has turned against us."

"Ugh! I know! I know! I really do! This era is too harsh for the likes of us! Even Fafnir is a mess!"

…Was it me, or were they starting to hit it off there? They were weeping their eyes out, their thoughts in perfect unison.

"Hmm. We should talk more. Maybe that will help us find peace."

"Yes, that could be a good thing… So I'm not the only one who's suffering…"

Why did it feel like they were about to reach a historical accord…?

"…You make it sound like Vali and I have wronged you," I muttered in protest.

"Sorry, partner," Ddraig said, his voice ice-cold. *"I'm talking to Albion. Nothing can be more important than this conversation right now."*

"Indeed. Could you leave us alone for the time being, Vali? There

are things only dragons can understand."

"Right… Fine. Anyway, what's going on over there?" Vali asked, shifting gears and pointing to Fafnir—still blissfully munching on Asia's swimsuit.

"Don't ask," I said. "Some things even I find hard to answer."

Seriously, don't. I felt like crying… I would have to take care of Asia's emotional needs later. That legendary dragon was no end of trouble.

Xenovia and Irina held her close.

"…Now that I've married Issei, I want to have five children. Hee-hee. You're already a papa, Issei, and you're off to play your *eroge* again. That won't do…"

"She's trying to escape from reality! Ugh! Asia!"

"Asia! Hold on! It's only a flesh wound!"

…! Asia! I'll give Fafnir a beating for this later, so hang in there!

"Hmm," Fafnir said once he finished chewing his feast. *"Time to launch this week's shock item."*

Next, emerging from his mouth—was a large tubelike object.

Azazel reached up to take it, slinging it over his shoulder like a bazooka.

"Heh-heh-heh. A replica Tathlum. Now then, let's see how well it holds up on Crom Cruach!"

He took aim—and unleashed a brilliant barrage!

The cannonball, once fired, seemed to take on a life of its own, zigzagging through the air before finally hurtling toward its target!

"The Tathlum? That brings back memories. A cursed bullet that never misses. In the old days, it would have posed quite a threat. But now…" Crom Cruach raised his arms—and they swelled into colossal dragon limbs!

He was bracing himself to take the Tathlum head-on, poised to catch it between his palms like he was squashing a mosquito.

But the moment he tried to seize it, the Tathlum changed trajectory, slipping under his arm!

It exploded with a thunderous roar, a dazzling golden glow flooding the entire hall!

The light very nearly left me dazed…but once it faded, I lay eyes

on an evil dragon in all its majesty, smoke billowing from its head.

…Did it work? The Tathlum had certainly made an impact. But what level of damage did it inflict?

When the smoke cleared, there he was—Crom Cruach, having caught the Tathlum in his enormous jaws!

Azazel heaved a dispirited sigh. "He stopped it…?"

Crom Cruach spat the Tathlum onto the floor. Moments later, his arms and head gradually shifted back to human form.

The only damage he had sustained so far were to his clothes and wings…

"…I suppose it's time," he breathed with a huff. "That should be enough, I think."

He spun around, then moved to lean against a nearby wall, any will to fight instantly vanishing.

"You're giving up?" Vali asked, perplexed.

"They just wanted me to buy them a few more minutes… Hopefully next time we meet, we can really go for it."

With that, Crom Cruach fell silent, refusing to engage in any further conversation and leaving the fierce battle, which had lasted until a moment ago, feeling like a distant dream.

The rest of us exchanged uneasy glances, then hurried on our way.

That damn evil dragon didn't even bother to follow us.

Though when I glanced over my shoulder, I caught him staring at Gasper…

…Yep. There was an awful lot about evil dragons—heck, about dragons in general—that I had yet to understand.

-○●○-

We made our way to the lowest underground level.

"Valerie! We're almost there!" Gasper called out ahead of our group. He must have been able to sense her nearby.

At long last, the stairwell came to a large, ornate stone door, which we threw open with a mighty bang.

We piled out into what looked like a ceremonial hall, adorned with weird-looking statues and shelves filled with ancient tomes, no doubt meant for ritual use.

"…G-Gasper…?" came Valerie's voice.

We spun around—and found her lying sprawled in the middle of a huge magic square.

The magic square was already emitting a suspicious glow, its light enveloping her while her features were wracked with pain.

"Valerieee!" Gasper screamed as he fought to approach, only to be held back by some invisible barrier.

He fixed his gaze on the man manipulating the arcane formula within the square—Marius.

"Stop! Please stop!" he pleaded. "Don't make her suffer any more! Please, you said you would set her free!"

But that bastard Marius broke into a wide grin. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm doing—*releasing* her from the Holy Grail before it destroys her body and soul completely."

"Aaahhhhhhhhh!" Valerie wailed, a piercing cry that seemed to rise up from the core of her being.

"Gah!"

"I can't cut through it!"

Xenovia and Kiba tried to break through the invisible barrier, but their attacks had no effect.

I clenched my fists, about to strike it myself, when Marius's derisive grin turned to me. "Oh? Please refrain from any clumsy attacks. If you interfere with the ceremony, neither the Holy Grail nor its host will emerge unscathed. That applies to you, too, Former Governor Azazel. I've studied the Holy Grail more than anyone else. I know how best to extract it."

Azazel deployed a small magic square of his own to examine Marius's spell work but soon let out an annoyed click of his tongue. "Tch! That defensive code…that's the biblical God's work! *I* don't even know how to do that! Where did you learn it?! Don't tell me Rizevim showed you?!"

Marius chuckled under his breath. "Rizevim has provided us with a great many resources. Our research on the Holy Grail has made

great strides thanks to his people, allowing us to resurrect malevolent creatures long thought to have been destroyed. On top of that, it seems Valerie's Holy Grail possesses unique qualities that set it apart from previous iterations. Most notably, it excels in diminishing vulnerabilities inherent to those it resurrects."

…So that was why those vampires had been unusually resilient and our Dragon Slayers had proven so ineffective against the evil dragons…

Marius stopped adjusting his spell for a second. "Oh-ho. I think we're done here."

The magic square unleashed a blinding light—ensnaring Valerie!

…Nightmarish memories flooded my head—of when Asia had her Sacred Gear ripped from her by Raynare!

"I'm going to use my Dragon Shot!" I shouted, when—

"Stop, Issei!" Rias held me back. "There's no telling what might happen if that spell is hit by a superpowered attack!"

"B-but if we don't…!"

I couldn't let it happen again…!

I watched on, my fists trembling uncontrollably—when a small chalice emerged from Valerie's body, a tiny cup gleaming in golden light. That was it, the Holy Grail, a holy relic ranking among the most powerful of Longinuses.

"…Ah…"

Stripped of her Sacred Gear, Valerie's energy left her, and she collapsed limp on the floor.

Marius, meanwhile, took the Holy Grail from her and raised it over his head. "The Sephiroth Graal. And what's more, the conditions for unlocking this Longinus's Balance Breaker have all been met."

…The magic square and its barrier faded away, letting Gasper rush over to Valerie.

"…Strange. Especially for a Longinus extraction…" Azazel frowned.

…Something seemed to be amiss.

"…Valerie…," Gasper murmured, cradling her limp body in his arms.

She opened her eyes in response, peering up as she gently caressed his tear-streaked face. "You've always been quick to cry,

Gasper… Ever since you were little… You must have gotten stronger since then, no…?”

Gasper took her hand in his own. “Sorry…” He sobbed. “I—I wasn’t fast enough…”

“…No. You did help me… I got to see you…before the end… You’re my one and only friend…my family… Gasper…?”

“…Yes?”

Valerie stared up at the ceiling—or rather, she seemed to be looking for something that lay beyond it. “I wanted…to see the sun… To go on a picnic with you all…”

“…You still can. I’ll take you outside. And we can have a picnic, too.”

…Why did this have to happen all over again…?

Asia, unable to bear what was happening, clung to my arm as she trembled with anguish… She had gone through this once herself…

As for me… I understood Gasper’s feelings only too well…

Valerie stroked his cheek, then rested her hand against his chest. “There’s another you…in here… I have one last request…”

Her voice was on the cusp of being snuffed out.

“…I wish I could have been there for you to talk about it with… You need to discuss it with your friends, Gasper… Because you’ve finally found somewhere you can belong…”

Her hand fell to the ground, her strength deserting her.

“…Get along with everyone, Gasper…”

Those were her last words.

“…!”

Gasper shook all over as he wrapped his arms around her unmoving body.

…It was too tragic for any of us to watch.

Meanwhile, Marius Tsepesh was still smiling, holding the Holy Grail in one hand.

“Rias Gremory,” he called out. “Unleash that devastating power of yours on me.”

A blue vein started throbbing at Rias’s temple, and she channeled an alarming amount of her destructive aura into her hands.

"…I'm not holding back anymore. I don't think I could if I wanted to," she said, unleashing the torrent of destructive power his way. "Get lost!"

That was a dangerous level of power to face undefended.

In fact, any half-hearted resistance would be obliterated along with its target.

Yet Marius surrendered himself to the blast, letting it wash over him.

…Only his lower body remained, along with the Holy Grail, floating in the air where he had been holding it. The rest of him was completely vaporized.

Was it over…? I wanted to think so—but at that moment, what little was left of him began to swell. Within seconds, he was fully restored, looking exactly as he had before Rias destroyed him.

A low growl escaped his lips as he grasped the floating chalice. "Hmm. Take a look. It's gained the ability to resurrect targets instantaneously. No doubt its aura meets less resistance now that it has been freed from its host. Part of me thought my soul might perish along with my body…but it must have remained in what was left. Clearly it was more than enough to regenerate from."

…The Holy Grail was capable of all that?! Even blown to pieces, he still managed to come back to life!

…No wonder Grendel was convinced he could just get a new body down the road…

At that moment, the hall burst into a round of applause. It wasn't Marius or any of us—but rather silhouettes slowly emerging from the shadows at either side of the room.

"…I suspected as much."

"Its regenerative abilities have been enhanced."

"Quite like a Phenex demon."

They were all men, middle-aged or elderly, each of them carrying themselves with dignity and pride.

Pure-blooded vampires, no doubt. Probably royalty or close to it. And all of them Marius's accomplices.

Marius's lips pulled up in a grin. "Uncles! Everything is ready. How shall we proceed? Further enhancements?"

The men answered as if addressing our group directly.

"We vampires, eternal denizens of the night, are riddled with weaknesses."

"Sunlight, running water, crosses, holy water… We are superior to humans, but we have suffered them to flourish due to our own inadequacies."

…Were these vampires completely insane?

I breathed an annoyed sigh.

"With the power of the Holy Grail, we shall transform ourselves!" they continued. "We shall be *more* than vampires!"

"And then *we* shall rule the world, not humans! Only under our dominion can they fulfill their true purpose—as livestock!"

…Livestock, huh? Could they be any more condescending? They were no different to certain demon bloodlines, arrogantly elevating themselves while looking down their noses at everyone else.

One of them breathed a sad sigh. "It was inevitable that our banished cattle would multiply in our absence, but they've been left unattended too long."

"Quite so. We shall reshape the world as it is meant to be."

"All that remains is to rid ourselves of the current king and those detestable Carmilla, and we can start anew. Then comes the final stage of our plan—to remake this land's inhabitants."

"How disappointing that our king chose to cling to the status quo despite the Holy Grail gracing our nation. The fool denied vampirekind the right to evolve."

Marius nodded thoughtfully, turning to us with a faint smile. "Well, I was happy just researching the Holy Grail. But as you can see, my superiors have made up their minds."

…He was as unhinged as they came. He teamed up with the Khaos Brigade and instigated a coup for this?

All so he could usurp the Holy Grail for himself?

And the second he didn't need her anymore, he killed Valerie in cold blood.

"…You're unbelievable." Azazel fixed him with a hard glare. "Longinuses really are something else. Their mere existence is enough to throw the world in chaos." He cast his gaze to me and

Vali.

"…You mean us as well?" I asked, pointing to myself.

Disbelief fell over his face. "You've been breaking all sorts of rules, if you haven't noticed."

Well, I couldn't exactly deny it…

"…It's too dangerous to let you hold on to that Sacred Gear. Hand it over," Rias urged Marius. "If you don't, we'll have no choice but to fight you."

"You have Sacred Gears and Longinuses of your own, do you not…? Do our different sets of values make mutual understanding impossible?" Marius quipped.

"Then give it to the Grigori," Azazel spoke up. "Researching Sacred Gears is our specialty. We can put it into safekeeping or lock it away, whatever you see fit. Or if that won't do, you can give it to Odin or Zeus. Either way, it's too dangerous to keep here. It was to be monitored and kept under close guard… But let's face it, you aren't going to listen to a word I say. Are you?"

Marius responded with only a thin smile. Naturally, there was no way he was going to hand it over.

"Just give it back!" I shouted, stepping forward. "I'm sick of your ideology, your pride, your twisted vampire values! The Holy Grail is too powerful for the likes of you!"

I couldn't let them keep on exploiting it! If talk wasn't going to get us anywhere, then we would just have to take it by force!

But the vampire leaders ignored me, addressing Rias and Azazel.

"Lady sister of the Demon King, former governor of the fallen angels. Even in the underworld, those of noble blood reign over their lessers. It is an eternal truth."

"You, too, have thrived on mankind's greed. In our case, we use them as sustenance, but the underlying approach is identical."

"As a pure-blooded demon yourself, Lady Rias Gremory, surely you can understand the distinction between nobility and lesser beings?"

"Heh-heh-heh… Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh… Cut the crap…"

An eerie laugh echoed through the ritual hall, interrupting the

senior vampires.

Everyone's gazes met at a single point—Gasper.

A dark aura was emanating from every pore of his being, slowly but surely filling the room.

Sluggishly, he rose to his feet, fixing Marius and the other vampires with a baleful glare, his eyes giving off an otherworldly gleam.

"Nobility…and lesser beings…?"

The ritual hall quickly succumbed to the encroaching darkness, with no one present capable of stopping it.

"If you're so transcendent, then show me…"

Darkness… Jet-black darkness… The hall was swallowed by shadow, everything cloaked in a sheet of impenetrable black.

A change had come over Gasper, at the heart of the inky void.

His entire body was engulfed in it, his human form breaking down into some monstrous beast.

His arms grew long and thick, sharp claws protruding from their tips, while a pronounced ridge formed across his back, sprouting multiple sets of wings while his legs twisted around.

His head had become almost dragon-like in shape, complete with horns and menacing fangs, while his bright red eyes let off a harrowing gleam.

"Gaaaauuuggghhh…!"

The creature's bestial roar pierced the darkness…

…I had never seen anything like it before. It had to be more than five meters tall, radiating a shadowy aura from every inch of its body.

…Was this Gasper's true form…?

I—no, the entire Gremory Familia—could only tremble and watch.

Only Vali remained unfazed, arms crossed as he observed in silence…

"…This phenomenon…" Even Azazel, as knowledgeable as he was, furrowed his brow in confusion.

"I-impossible…!"

"What's going on?!"

Even the vampire leaders were taken aback, quaking in disbelief.

Only Marius maintained his calm focus, his gaze carefully examining Gasper's changed form. "Be calm, Uncles. This must be Gasper Vladi's true nature, just as Euclid described. There's no need for fear. It would be a disgrace for us evolved vampires if we succumbed to this half-breed."

His superiors nodded, though they still looked somewhat intimidated.

"I-indeed. Precisely."

"We vampires have been made transcendent through the power of the Holy Grail! There is no way a mere half-breed could outpace __"

Marius was cut off by a loud snapping sound as a massive, crocodile-like mouth emerged from the darkness below and consumed him whole.

"Transcendent, you say…?" chortled Gasper…or rather, whatever it was he had become.

Black creatures the likes of which I had never seen before oozed from every corner of the room. There were three-necked dragons, butterflies with reptilian bodies, creatures that looked like some hybrid of flower and dragon, one-eyed giants… One after the next, they spawned from the depths of that obsidian darkness, advancing on the vampires.

The vampires quivered in fear. Only Marius remained unruffled.

The next moment, one man's face contorted in fury as a swarm of insects and beasts emerged from his own flesh.

"You're not the only one capable of these tricks!" another shouted. "You're nothing more than a beast cloaked in darkness!"

Snatch.

Just like that, a monstrous bird swooped down and plucked him off from the ground, dropping him into an area already swarming with other monsters…

"S-stop! Nooo!" he wailed as they tore him apart.

…What the…? Was that really Gasper in there…? Since when could he conjure up something *this* terrifying…?

But this was his true power, his true form…

I couldn't stop trembling. The dark creatures continued to

multiply, covering the entire floor space and cornering the vampires one at a time.

The monsters showed no interest in us, however.

"Eeep!"

"Wh-what?! Our powers are supposed to have been evolved?!"

"Wh-what's going on?!"

"What the hell is this?!"

The vampires fought tooth and nail, but no matter how many times they felled their attackers, fresh creatures continued to emerge from the darkness to take their place.

"Do you understand why you can't unleash your vampire powers properly? Because your enhanced strength from the Holy Grail is holding you back."

Hold on! The Holy Grail was limiting their powers?! W-was that really how it worked?! No wonder those old vampires were at such a disadvantage!

Before long, they were fully ensnared, held down by the encroaching darkness.

"Ugh! You wretched *imitation* vampire! Spawned from a human womb!"

"Stay back, foul creature! Aaahhh! W-we possess noble blood…! A history and culture you can't even begin to—"

"All right. Devour them."

With that signal, the creatures of the night consumed the vampire leaders.

The resulting carnage was too much for Asia to bear. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her hands against her ears.

Once the vampire leaders were eradicated, there remained just one man, putting his hands together in applause.

"Wonderful," Marius said, his expression calm even after witnessing that horrific sight. "Beings possessed of extraordinary talent have recently started emerging among our half-breeds. Many of them are in possession of Sacred Gears… You stand out among them. I dare say your potential rivals that of the Holy Grail. How about it? Would you be willing to contribute to my research?"

The fact that he could come out with that ludicrous request after

what he had just done was proof he was truly unhinged.

"…Like Valerie, you mean?" Gasper spat back venomously.

"Are you angry? Well, listen close. My research on the Holy Grail was—"

A loud whoosh whipped through the air—the result of Gasper swinging his arm in a horizontal cut.

Marius was left unable to respond to the mass of concentrated air in time, and his left arm was sliced off at the shoulder.

"Oh dear… Such ferocity. Yet this aggression of yours is meaningless against one enhanced by the Holy Grail."

So he said…yet while the Holy Grail let out a brilliant glow, his left arm failed to regenerate.

"…Hmm?" Marius murmured, visibly perturbed. "Why isn't my arm regenerating…? Has the Holy Grail been weakened? No, that can't be… Then what…?"

"…"

Silently, Gasper swung his arm again, more forcefully this time.

Marius leaped back in an effort to evade the attack, but the jaws of the crocodile-like creature from before sprang up from the ground, clamping around his right leg.

Next, Gasper reached out, shattering the trapped limb.

"Gah!" Marius cried, falling flat on his backside. "My leg… What *is* this?"

Again, the Holy Grail burned radiant, but like the arm blasted away a moment ago, his leg didn't regrow.

As to be expected, genuine confusion fell over him, a hint of fear entering his voice. "Why can't I regenerate? My arm! My leg! There's no response! I can't transform, either! Not into a bat, or an insect, or a beast! You! Did you somehow deactivate my powers?! Impossible! Those others were one thing, but I'm holding the Holy Grail in my very hands! Yet my abilities are sealed…?!"

He stared down at his gaping wounds.

They were all smeared with some dark substance.

"…Th-the darkness is consuming my injuries…? Obstructing them from regenerating…? I-it can't be…! Your powers are stronger even than the Holy Grail?!"

"What's the matter? If you're going to regenerate, make it quick. I'll just destroy your limbs all over again," Gasper muttered, inching closer one step at a time.

"W-wait!" Marius cried, growing increasingly panicked. "Calm down… Right! What if we cloned Valerie with the Holy Grail? If we can salvage her soul, it might work! You can take it back to Japan with you! That will make everyone happy!"

That, however, had the opposite of its intended effect.

"…Enough," Gasper growled. *"If there's any chance of reviving Valerie, it's no reason for you to live. No… You die here."*

Once more, he closed in while Marius scrambled on the ground in a desperate effort to escape.

Marius's previous composure was nowhere to be seen, leaving only a deepening despair.

"S-stop!" he wailed, holding the Holy Grail in front of himself. "Don't come any closer! You lowly half-breed! Nooo!"

The monsters born from the darkness surrounded him.

"You'll likely face restrictions on the use of your Familia members in the not-too-distant future, Rias Gremory," Vali murmured from the side. "I'm not just talking about Issei Hyoudou… Gasper Vladi is much more dangerous than he is."

"…"

Rias was left at a loss for words.

Gasper, meanwhile, stared Marius down. *"I won't leave even a shred of you in this world. Your fate is to be consumed by darkness, soul and all."*

With that signal, the monsters swarmed Marius en masse.

"N-nooooooooo!"

His screams echoed throughout the room.

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After the vampire leaders responsible for the coup were all consumed by darkness, the shadows enveloping the hall on the bottom floor of the castle's underground section began to lift,

leaving behind only Gasper, changed, as he was, into a monster.

With Marius and the others gone, Azazel rushed over to Valerie and activated a small magic square to examine her.

"…Something's been bothering me for a while now…," he murmured, when he suddenly stopped. "I see… I guess I can put those doubts to rest."

"What do you mean?" Rias asked.

Azazel pointed to Valerie. "Her Holy Grail is an irregular variant. There's only supposed to be one Holy Grail, but there's still another inside her. I thought it was strange. That was too quiet for an extraction. According to my own research, it should be a much more dramatic affair when a Longinus is removed from its host."

"—?!"

We all startled!

Seriously?! A variant-type Longinus?! *Two* Holy Grails?!

"B-but I thought there could only be one of each Longinus?" I asked.

At least, that was what I was told. After all, another Boosted Gear wasn't supposed to be able to exist at the same time as mine.

Azazel nodded. "Yeah. Basically. It probably still counts as one entity, despite being a variant. There's no precedent for this, so I'll have to investigate more thoroughly… But she isn't dead. Half of the Holy Grail is still inside her. If we can return the part that was extracted from her, we might be able to restore it to how it was… Honestly, this latest crop of Longinus is just plain baffling," he said with a sigh.

"Wow!"

The rest of us voiced our relief.

Thank goodness! She wasn't dead! Dammit! After seeing that, just like what happened to Asia… I hated myself for being unable to stop it, for making Gaspy and Valerie live though that pain.

"What a relief…," Asia said, shedding tears of joy.

"Bring the Holy Grail over here. Let's try putting it back," Azazel said as he began the ritual to reintegrate the Sacred Gear into its host.

But to think, Valerie had *two* Holy Grails… Was that why her

mental degradation was so bad?

With that thought, my gaze fell on Gasper, still transformed into some black beast watching over our efforts to revive Valerie.

"Whoa…," I whispered.

Gasper let out a low chuckle. *"I thought you would recognize me, Red Dragon Emperor."*

Recognize him…? What was that supposed to mean?

It was Rias who spoke up next. "You aren't Gasper, are you?"

"I am. But at the same time, I'm not. A fragment of Balor's consciousness took root in my other self while he was still in his mother's womb."

At this, Azazel's features contorted in surprise. "Balor?! The dark god from Celtic mythology?!"

Balor? Dark god? Wasn't Balor what his Sacred Gear was called?

"Teach? Is there a connection between Gasper's Sacred Gear and some god?" I asked.

Azazel's face lit up. "Balor is a deity renowned for his Evil Eye. He's also famous for being able to control Crom Cruach. I thought the Forbidden Balor View was named in homage to him… I had no idea the actual Balor resided inside it. Is that why the Tathlum didn't react to it earlier, being just a replica?"

"Like I said, I'm a fragment of Balor's consciousness. The original Balor was destroyed by the god Lugh, leaving only remnants of his lost power. So I am Balor, and yet I am not. I'm Gasper Vladi. Sacred Gears are curious things, with the potential to channel legendary dragons, monsters, and even dark gods. The biblical God must have been a fearsome being indeed to have created them."

…I didn't quite follow, but Azazel was nodding along thoughtfully…

W-well, I could have him break it down to me in simple terms later.

For now, I was more curious about something else he had just said.

"What did you mean when you said you thought I would recognize you?" I asked.

"When you went on your rampage, the descendant of that old

Demon King was frozen for a time. Do you remember? That was because I linked with your gaze. Like this…"

—.

All at once, my vision shifted! Hold on… I was looking at myself?! It was me, in my crimson armor!

"I've swapped our perspectives, so you're seeing the world through my eyes."

…R-right… I had no idea this was even possible. But come to think of it, I did remember something like Gasper's ability being used on Shalba when my Juggernaut Drive went out of control. I thought it might have been a hidden Red Dragon Emperor power… But maybe it was Gasper's ability fused with my own?

Ah. My vision returned to normal.

Kiba, next to me, nodded in understanding. "So that was a combination of Gasper's and Issei's powers…?! If they can resonate so closely…is that because the dark god and the Heavenly Dragon were able to control Crom Cruach in the distant past…?!"

Xenovia and Irina approached Gasper cautiously.

"I-is that really you, Gasper?"

"You look bigger… And a bit scary."

The two of them seemed unconcerned, the fear that had gripped them just moments ago nowhere to be seen. I suppose I was starting to get used to this version of him, too… With so much happening, my senses were playing tricks on me.

Gasper, unperturbed by how naturally the two girls were acting, strode over to Valerie, reaching out with his transformed hand to caress her cheek. *"I felt a need to save this girl with the Holy Grail. A strong, urgent need. A sentiment unlike any obligation felt by the other me… Is this gratitude? I'm not sure, but perhaps she had already used the Holy Grail's powers subconsciously even before awakening to its full potential. The fragment of Balor's consciousness that formed me—did she give it fresh life…?"*

"Are you saying Valerie gave life to Gasper as a child…? And that the reason Rias was able to reincarnate him was because he has a piece of Balor in him…? Does that mean he received his Forbidden Balor View because of Balor's influence as well…? It sounds like a

dumb joke, the idea that the original dark god could reside in an imitation Sacred Gear… But why didn't Crom Cruach react earlier…?" Azazel continued to mutter under his breath, mulling over the implications of what we had learned.

"At the very least, this state is a fusion between Balor and the Sacred Gear," Gasper answered. *"It's a Balance Breaker, but at the same time, it isn't. Hmm… Let's call it Forbidden Invade Balor the Beast."*

He named it himself! I had heard of cases where people could pull a Sacred Gear's name from deep in their mind… And those with variant-type Balance Breakers tended to create their own.

Though in my case, it was Sairaorg who had named my True Queen state.

Azazel gave Gasper another look over. "We might as well categorize that thing as a pseudo-Longinus… Heck, maybe it should already be counted as a real one. It's a completely different entity to the original Forbidden Balor View."

Seriously?! So this was going to be a fourteenth Longinus?! Sure, there had only been thirteen of them discovered up till now, but that wasn't necessarily a hard limit!

It wasn't outside the realm of possibility for a new one to arise, but for Gasper to be in possession of it…

"…A new Longinus…?" Rias asked with bated breath.

"Well, I'll confirm the details once I get back to Grigori headquarters," Azazel said.

Before long, the darkness comprising Gasper's transformation began to dissipate.

"…Looks like my time's up. I'll leave the rest to you while I catch a little sleep."

The darkness was stripped bare, slowly revealing Gasper's usual self.

As the darkness faded, its bestial mouth twisted in a broad grin. *"Know that while I taint everything with darkness, I promise to do you members of the Occult Research Club no harm. I've been watching you through the eyes of my other self for a long time,"* he said, glancing at each of us in turn. *"President Rias, Akeno, Koneko,*

Yuuto, Asia, Xenovia, Irina, Ravel, Rossweisse, Azazel, and Issei, the Red Dragon Emperor. You are all my dear friends…"

With that message, the darkness dissipated, and Gasper collapsed to the floor unconscious.

Rias pulled him close, tears welling in her eyes. "It doesn't matter what you are. You're one of my people, Gasper…"

The rest of us nodded in agreement.

Ah, Gasper was our invaluable friend! My dear junior!

It wasn't long before Azazel reached the end of his resurrection spell, and with a dazzling flash, the Holy Grail made its way back into Valerie's body.

"That should wake her up…," he said.

We all watched over her…but she showed no sign of rousing.

Sensing something amiss, Azazel looked her over again. "Strange… She's breathing. But her consciousness hasn't returned…? Are we missing something?" he wondered aloud, head tilted to one side.

At that moment, an unknown voice broke the silence. "Ah. You might need this as well if you want to put her back together properly."

"I've been waiting for you, Rizevim Livan Lucifer!" Vali cried out, his features contorting in rage.

Yes, it was that old geezer with his joking smile and mocking tone of voice.

And floating next to him—was a third Holy Grail! We all stared back wide-eyed in disbelief.

"Yes, little Valerie possesses three Holy Grails," the man—Rizevim—said with a grin. "That's one extraordinarily unusual Longinus. We already extracted the first one. Not even Marius realized there was more than one. And he considered himself an expert on the thing! It's laughable really."

—! *Three* Holy Grails…?! And they had already extracted one of them?!

Rizevim chortled with laughter as he greeted Vali once more. "Yo! It's your grandpa Rizevim again! It's finally time for the real fun to begin. So, good children, pay close attention to what I'm about to

say.”

A new evil was just awakening.





Life.4

Rizevim Livan Lucifer

Before us stood a silver-haired, middle-aged man with a chalice floating by his side—and with him was a small girl, Lilith, Ophis's alter ego.

He fixed Vali with an ugly grin, who responded with a wave of anger unlike anything I had seen with him before.

Seriously, this was my first time seeing him so incensed. Sure, he had been furious when Cao Cao took down Azazel and Kuroka…but this was on another level entirely.

Rizevim burst into laughter. "Ha-ha-ha! It's almost too much to handle, seeing my cute little grandbaby looking at me like that!"

At this point, I couldn't help but wonder what he had done to Vali in the past.

"Did something happen between them, Teach?" I asked.

Azazel's expression turned stern. "The bastard ordered his own son, Vali's father, to tyrannize him."

—!

…What? He bullied his own grandson…?

Perhaps overhearing, Rizevim pursed his lips in a pout. "Hey, I can't let that slide. All I did was give that idiot son of mine some straightforward advice. *'If you're scared of him, then show him who's boss.'* That thin-skinned coward just couldn't handle it when the White Dragon Emperor popped up in a Demon King's bloodline."

So he didn't know how to deal with a child endowed with exceptional talent? I wasn't a parent, so I couldn't say for sure, but would someone really feel jealous or threatened if their child was more gifted than they were?

Rizevim chuckled. "So in the end, li'l Vali couldn't put up with his pops's bullshit anymore and ran away from home. I heard he wound

up with the Grigori, and Azazel ended up raising him. Ain't that a trip? Uncle Azazel is always so caring when it comes to kids."

Azazel fixed him with an odious glare.

"…This is pointless," Vali growled. "What happened to him?"

"Hmm? You wanna know what happened to your dear old dad? Ha-ha-ha! I killed him! What can I say? He was a coward. I got fed up seeing him all pathetic and weak. So I did him in. Oh? Feeling mad about it, are we?" he quipped.

"Not really," Vali answered in a flat voice. "I would have done it myself… But I'm glad." The aura surrounding him swelled violently. "You're the one I want to see dead… You have no right to use the name of the Demon King Lucifer…!" he cried, his white armor glowing brightly.

Rizevim's grin was one of pure delight. "Good… You've got a killer gaze there. Seriously, you raised this kid right, Azazel. Strange to think that puny crybaby is back, filled with all this murderous ferocity!"

Vali could have launched into an attack at any moment, prompting Azazel to gently restrain him.

"…What are you planning to do with the Holy Grail, Rizevim?" he asked. "And with those evil dragons you've revived?"

Yes. What *did* he want to use it for? He and Euclid were undoubtedly the ones pulling the strings in this whole affair, but why?

What on earth were they hoping to achieve?

What was the newly reformed Khaos Brigade's true objective…?

"Ha-ha-ha! You want to know?" Rizevim laughed loudly as his gaze fell on the Holy Grail. "All right, I'll break it down for you. It all started a few months back, when a weird phenomenon came to our attention—proof of another world, one we were completely unaware of. Sure, people have been debating it for ages, but now it's confirmed."

…A-another world? It was an outlandish claim, but Azazel alone responded with profound shock.

"—!"

Did he know what Rizevim was hinting at? I couldn't help but

notice him glancing in my direction…

Huh? Did it have something to do with me…?

"You follow me, don't you, Azazel?" Rizevim continued. "When that evil god Loki showed up in Japan, that was when possibility became real." He paused there, pointing a finger at me. "*You* did it, Breast Dragon! When you reached out to some otherworldly god, your Breast Goddess or whatever it was!"

—!

Th-the Breast Goddess?! Right, I communicated with a spirit using my Boob-Lingual technique, and it claimed to serve something called the Breast Goddess, who it said was from another plane of existence!

"That deity was an unknown god, from a world with no connection to any known mythos. Not the Bible, not the Norse, not Hindu legend, not even Japanese mythology—a god incomprehensible to us, reaching out to make contact with our world. For researchers of other worlds, it was a revolutionary moment."

…I had no idea. A mysterious deity from an unknown world. Our world was said to consist of the human realm, the underworld, the celestial realm, and the various domains inhabited by the gods of different mythologies.

But one with a Breast Goddess…? That world wasn't our own.

Rizevim nodded. "So I thought to myself…why don't we go on the offensive and roll on in?!"

A-attack them?!

That declaration triggered an immediate change in everyone's bearing.

On guard, we listened close to Rizevim's next words.

"But that ain't easy. There's an all-powerful dragon guarding the dimensional void around our world, making it next to impossible to slip into the other one. You know who I'm talking about—the Great Red."

"…You're going after the Great Red?!" Azazel blurted in realization.

Rizevim's lips spread in a wide grin at this response. "Yep! You

guessed it, Azazel! I ought to give you damn near perfect marks! I felt like smashing through the Great Red and charging headfirst into that other world!"

…He wanted to take down the Great Red?! Whoa, whoa, whoa! Things were getting out of hand here! Seriously?! Defeating that massive dragon so he could invade another world?!

"But the Great Red's too strong, I know that. Insanely, impossibly strong. There's no way I could compete. I tried to provoke Ophis to do it for me, but that brat Cao Cao had to go make a mess of things by splitting her powers in half. So why not just merge the two pieces back together? Well, it ain't that simple, is it?"

Lilith remained expressionless and unmoving by the old demon's side.

But Rizevim wasn't finished.

"So who *could* beat the Great Red? Me? Not in this life. Maybe we could grab Samael and get him to do it? But that would just set Hades off, and besides, Samael's curse would probably wipe out our own enhanced evil dragon army. So we've only got one option left—enacting a passage from the Book of Revelation. The Apocalypse."

As far as I could tell, he was spouting utter gibberish—yet Azazel's face turned pale.

"…Trihexa…," he muttered under his breath.

…Trihexa?

Rizevim gave another satisfied nod. "Right again, Azazel. You want a medal or something? Or a trip to the States? Being a know-it-all has its perks. Seriously, though, the Great Red isn't the only legendary creature mentioned in the Book of Revelation… There's the Apocalyptic Beast, 666, Trihexa. The one hinted at in the Bible. He'd give the Great Red a run for his money, wouldn't you say?"

"What's this Trihexa?" I asked Azazel.

"…You know how the number 666 is a bad omen, right? It all comes from the fact that that's the number of the beast mentioned alongside the Great Red in the Book of Revelation."

…A beast on par with the Great Red?! I had skimmed through the Book of Revelation once before, and I did remember another creepy monster popping up in it.

So that monster, Trihexa, was where the number 666 came from?!

"Its existence is just a possibility, and people across the different factions are still debating what it actually is. Or at least, that's what I thought," Azazel admitted.

"Ha-ha-ha. That's the thing… After using the Holy Grail to delve into the principles of life itself, that's where we found him, at the end of a forgotten world. But someone else got to dear old Trihexa first and put him under a seal. Can you guess who?" Rizevim blew a kiss to the Holy Grail. "The biblical God, that's who. He's something else, huh? He'd already found it long before we did and locked it away with thousands and thousands of sealing techniques. Maybe that's why he kicked the bucket. Plenty of them were evil, forbidden sealing techniques, the kind that would jeopardize your own life if you tried to use them. If the three great powers went to war right after he did it, he could have been so worn down he'd let himself get extinguished once and for all."

So the biblical God found the legendary Trihexa and, unknown to the rest of the world, placed an extraordinarily powerful seal on it? And that was perhaps why he met his end in the Great War…?

I understood the basics, but the finer details still eluded me.

Azazel turned to the bed where Valerie was lying. "Did Marius copy one of those Trihexa sealing techniques to use on her?!" he demanded.

Rizevim nodded. "Right on! We're in the middle of breaking through those seals one by one! It would be a heck of a lot easier if we had the Holy Spear, but we're progressing smoothly enough with the Holy Grail and the True Cross!"

They were using the Holy Grail and the True Cross to break through the seals?! There was no way that was how those holy relics were supposed to be used!

"So here's the deal. After we revive Trihexa and defeat, destroy, or drive off the Great Red, we'll take our resurrected evil dragon army and Trihexa and make for that other world!" Rizevim declared. "I'll trample and annihilate every god, monster, and creature that crosses our path and create a utopia all my own! Ha-ha-ha!" he

chortled as his lips curled in a bemused grin. “Mmm. Just thinking about it gets me all hyped up. Imagine how they would see it over on their side—an evil being from another world invades theirs, accompanied by a mighty beast and a horde of evil dragons, bringing calamity and misfortune… Something like that, right? Here, I’m just the son of the old Demon King Lucifer. But there, I could be the unrivaled Great Demon King himself!”

“You’ve really done all this for something so stupid?!” I blurted, unable to bury my indignation.

He just kept blabbering on and on about hurting people! I felt like punching him in the face!

“Sorry for boring you,” he said with a sigh. “I’ve finally found a goal worth working toward. For a demon who’s lived as long as I have, dreams aren’t easy things to come by.”

I had heard that before. Demons had incredibly long life spans, so they were prone to losing their sense of purpose. For that reason, it was important to plan your life out properly. That was especially true for those reincarnated from humans, who tended to be in a hurry to get everything they wanted.

There was a distant look in Rizevim’s eyes. “Let me tell you, I was just coasting through life till I found this kick-ass dream. I mean, I don’t even know what the point of it all was now. I didn’t have the faintest idea what a dream was. And ambition? What the hell was that? Why was I born a demon? I spent years just lounging on the couch, sipping wine, thinking about mindless crap like it mattered. Nah, I wasn’t living—I was more like a rock sitting there, stuck in my own thoughts. Honestly, I kinda envy humans for that ambition they’ve always got bubbling up in them. I guess it’s just the different way our brains are wired.” His face brightened. “And then one day, my buddy Euclid drops by with news. He fills me in on Ophis, the secrets of the Holy Grail, and proof of another world—and then there’s the cherry on top, Trihexa. For the first time in my life, I was genuinely excited. Seriously, my heart was pounding with anticipation! I realized I *had* to resurrect those fallen evil dragons and plunge the world into chaos, and then, just to spice things up, cause some serious mayhem in this other world!” he boasted like an

overgrown child.

"How does that make any sense?!" I shouted back. "Why do you have to go rampage in someone else's world?!"

That was just some old geezer's dream of running amok! There was no rhyme or reason behind it! Not even any lofty ideals like Cao Cao had!

He was just a selfish, old bastard!

"Listen here, kid," he said, wagging his finger in the air. "Demons have gotta be evil, monstrous, wicked, devoted to deceit and chaos. Being a demon is about being utterly ruthless and vile. You want to play the part of a hero? Defend justice and all that? That's for humans and angels. But us? We're *demonic*. What else is there to do but embrace that role?" He cast his wicked grin in our direction. "People who get under my skin, I'll wipe them out, wherever they are. Demons and dragons, we're villains, right? So I'll let them all run wild in this other world, let them destroy everything they don't like, and let them kill anyone who crosses their path!"

—!

Not on my watch! I didn't care if he was Lucifer's son or what, I would be damned if I was going to let him have his way!

I could sense that the others agreed with me on that point, as we were all glaring at Rizevim.

Seeing us united, he burst into laughter. "Ha-ha-ha! Oh, look at those cold eyes! Those aren't demon eyes—that's for sure… You're looking through the lenses of *justice* and *righteousness*. Yeah. Those are the eyes of *heroes*. There's no saving you bunch, especially you, Red Dragon Emperor. Do you even understand what you are? You're a monster of monsters kind of demon."

…While my body might have been recreated using the powers of Ophis and the Great Red, I wasn't about to become evil or malevolent like he was…!

At the very least, I had never once wanted to plunge the world into chaos!

"Do you hate me? Fine. Bring it on. Friends of my grandkid Vali are always welcome." He chuckled, beckoning to us fearlessly. "Come on, Heavenly Dragon kid. I'll play along. If you haven't

noticed, I'm like an adult with all the maturity of a middle schooler!"

"Talk all you like! But that Holy Grail—I'm taking it back!" I shouted, lunging forward and channeling my aura into a Dragon Shot.

—.

Surprisingly, Vali, who had been so eager to fight his grandfather, refrained from launching any attacks of his own.

"Wait, Issei!" Azazel called to stop me. "His ability—"

But instead of listening, I let a massive Dragon Shot loose!

A Dragon Shot charged while in my True Queen state! How's that for power?!

I waited to gauge how Rizevim would respond—but he took no defensive action at all, letting the bombardment make a direct hit.

On the moment of impact, my Dragon Shot vanished like a wisp of smoke!

"—! What the…?" I gawked in disbelief.

I had hit my target. The Dragon Shot had struck him head-on in the best way possible.

And yet the second it did, it disappeared entirely.

Azazel grimaced. "Listen to me, Issei. This guy has an ability unique among demons… Sacred Gear Canceler, it's called. No special traits brought forth by Sacred Gears or any powers enhanced by them can touch him… That goes for your Red Dragon Emperor powers, as well as Kiba's Holy Demon Swords…"

"—?!"

The rest of the Gremory Familia tensed up at this explanation!

…Sacred Gears were ineffective on him…?! He could just cancel them out?!

That Dragon Shot was powered up thanks to my Boosted Gear. So it just fizzled out of existence when it hit him, leaving him completely unfazed…? I still couldn't believe it.

The same would no doubt apply for Kiba, who was brandishing a Holy Demon Sword in his hands.

"Haaah!"

There was a sudden flash. And yet—

His blade vanished soundlessly the second it reached its target.

"—! It doesn't work…?!" He startled, quickly jumping to safety.

"Ha-ha-ha. Not even your irregular Holy Demon Swords can touch me." Rizevim guffawed in amusement.

…So this was why Vali hadn't recklessly plunged in. He was currently clad in his White Dragon Emperor armor, which meant any attacks he unleashed would be amplified by its power.

It, too, was born from a Sacred Gear, and so long as his Divine Dividing was involved, he could inflict no damage on Rizevim!

"…I guessed as much. Looks like our heightened Heavenly Dragon powers won't get through, either," Vali said through clenched teeth.

He must have only been able to confirm that due to my last attack. Maybe he had been waiting to see if it would get through.

Like me, he had grown in a different direction from past Heavenly Dragon hosts. His conclusion could only be that if my attacks didn't work, then neither would his.

Seeing the regret fall over his face, Rizevim's evil smile deepened. "Have you ever asked yourselves why Sirzechs's Familia is made up entirely of people without Sacred Gears? Well, there are a bunch of factors at play there. But the number one reason? You've realized it by now, haven't you? *Because they would be useless against me.* So me and this Holy Grail here, we're out of your reach!"

With that, the air distorted around his hand, and he placed the Holy Grail into a subspace fold, all without having to physically touch it.

…He was right. There *were* no Sacred Gear users in Sirzechs's Familia.

I *had* found it strange. They were an immensely powerful team, and none of them needed to draw on a Sacred Gear for their power.

…So this was why. Sirzechs had taken pains to make sure every member of his Familia wouldn't be automatically blocked when fighting this guy.

I could feel it in my bones. Heavenly Dragons and Longinuses were all Sacred Gears, which meant…they wouldn't be able to hurt him…!

"How about a regular Holy Sword, then?!" Xenovia cried out,

swinging the Ex-Durendal and sending a plume of holy aura flying Rizevim's way!

At that moment, the girl, Lilith, intercepted the attack—and, with a wave of her hand, brushed it effortlessly away!

…I knew it! As a clone of Ophis, she was impervious to most attacks! How were we supposed to get past a bodyguard like this?!

Sacred Gears wouldn't work, and Lilith would block all other attacks! Rizevim's defenses were near enough flawless!

Watching us struggle to retrieve the Holy Grail, he broke into a mocking laugh. "Well, that's enough of that. I want to show you something."

He snapped his fingers—and a three-dimensional image appeared before us in the underground hall, depicting some outside landscape.

"Now, do you have any idea where this is?" he asked mischievously.

Snowflakes were dancing through the air above what looked like a townscape.

There was a castle in the center. Could it be…?

The others came to the same conclusion I did.

"The Carmilla capital?" Rias asked.

"Exactly!" Rizevim answered with a grand nod. "The Carmilla castle town!"

There didn't seem anything particularly out of place with it. It was just a town in the snow…

Rizevim extended a hand toward the projection. "Now. Watch carefully. This is gonna be wild. When I snap my fingers…," he said, preparing to do precisely that. "Something crazy's gonna happen. Can you guess what it is? Destruction? Ha-ha-ha! Nearly, but not quite!"

We prepared ourselves for the worst—but we couldn't notice any changes in the video feed… Even Rizevim seemed puzzled, checking the video a few times and furrowing his brow.

"Hold on a sec. Yeah, we're getting close. Ah, there it is!" he exclaimed, pointing with a finger.

Looking carefully, I noticed several large dark figures taking flight

against the snowy landscape.

…Were they…dragons?! Black dragons! And not just one or two, a whole bunch of them, all exuding sinister auras! They were converging on the castle in the middle of the Carmilla town!

The old geezer flashed us a mischievous grin. "Check it out! Mysterious black dragons rolling up in town! And guess what? They're about to cause some serious commotion. Oh, look! They're already spitting fire! This is gonna be wild!"

In the video, the town was under attack!

It was terrible! Those black dragons were attacking the Carmilla castle town!

"What's the meaning of this, Rizevim?!" Azazel demanded.

The old demon wore a grotesque grin. "Some of those Carmilla vampires crave what the Tsepesh have got—bodies stripped of weaknesses. We made a deal to upgrade them in exchange for intel… But here's the thing!"

On the holographic display, malevolent evil dragons pressed on with their attack.

"They've been modified to the max! Basically, I can turn 'em all into mass-produced evil dragons with just a snap of my fingers!"

—!

…So those things, those mass-produced evil dragons…

"Th-they're really…?!" Rias began, her breath catching in her throat.

"That's the endgame for those vampires priding themselves on tradition and blood before all else!" Rizevim said with delight.

No way! So they'd promised to enhance those vampires' abilities but had actually turned them into monstrous evil dragons?!

"Those bloodsuckers like to say vampires take care of their own problems, so I guess it's only fitting for them to destroy their own town. Though in this case, they're more like *former* vampires!"

We could only watch on in stunned silence.

To think that the Carmilla clan would be assaulted by evil dragons who used to be their own people… Most of their combat forces were probably tied up trying to suppress the coup over here, and they couldn't have many defenses left over. On top of that, vampires were

always loath to request outside help. If this kept on, the town would be doomed…

We watched on helplessly as the snowy town was engulfed in flames, when another evil hand slowly crept up on us…

All at once, the ground beneath our feet shook violently.

An earthquake…? We all wondered the same thing, but the tremors persisted, growing increasingly intense. No, this wasn't an earthquake. Something was happening aboveground.

Whatever it was, it had to be major for us to feel it this far belowground…

"Wh-what's happening?!" Rias exclaimed, looking up at the ceiling.

Rizevim snapped his fingers as if suddenly remembering something. "Ah, I nearly forgot! Sorry about that! When I snap my fingers, the ones over here activate, too!"

"—. It can't be… That shaking…?!" Rias said in panic.

An unsettling image was taking shape in my mind as well. How could this be any worse?!

Rizevim's smirk all but dripped with disdain. "Yep, that's how it is. Those enhanced Tsepesh vampires will have all turned into mass-produced evil dragons as well. By now, they're probably rampaging through the town!"

—! I knew it…! Those tremors…they were caused by the evil dragons—the enhanced Tsepesh vampires—running amok aboveground!

Rizevim activated another three-dimensional projection—this one of the streets of the Tsepesh town, up in flames just like the Carmilla one.

"…What the hell…?!" Azazel fumed, quivering with rage.

Rizevim watched on with amusement. "Look at that. They're making a real spectacle of it, huh? At this rate, it's only a matter of time before this place comes crashing down."

While we watched on, unable to respond to the destruction of both towns, Rizevim snapped his fingers once more—and with that, a massive teleportation square unfolded beneath our feet.

"Well, since you're curious, I'll let you go check it out firsthand,"

he said as the magic square erupted with blinding light.

When I opened my eyes, it was nighttime. We were outside. We glanced around, taking in our surroundings.

Evil dragons were flying through the air, spewing torrents of flames all through the town!

As for where we had been transported to—we seemed to be atop one of the castle towers.

From this vantage point, the entire town lay sprawled out before us, giving us front-row seats to the rampaging evil dragons!

Dammit! It was awful! There was fire and smoke everywhere, with nearly every single building already in ruins! It was like a sea of flame out there!

"Ugh… That bastard Rizevim did all this…?" Azazel looked around.

"Rizevim!" Vali shouted, glancing up overhead.

"Yoo-hoo! Vali? Gramps is here to play! Why don't you give me a shoulder rub or something? That would make me real happy!"

Rizevim was flying through the air, holding his Ophis clone Lilith in one arm while waving to us with the other!

The next moment, Vali unfurled his wings and took off after him.

"Hey, Vali!" Azazel called out in an effort to hold him back.

But Vali had already lost his temper at his grandfather's provocation, launching into an aerial battle!

"Dammit!" Azazel huffed angrily. "There's no way out of this! Hey, Rias!" he called, pointing to the rampaging evil dragons. "We'd better split up to take care of those mass-produced abominations and evacuate the townspeople! Whatever the top brass has been up to, the people living here aren't to blame! We've got to save them!"

"Right!" Rias answered with a forceful nod. "Everyone, get into pairs! I'll go with Akeno, Yuuto with Rossweisse, and Xenovia with Irina. You should be able to look after yourself, right, Issei?"

"Of course!" I answered.

That was what my crimson armor was for! I could take on those mass-produced evil dragons without breaking a sweat!

Rias glanced over at Xenovia, Irina, and Asia. "First, Xenovia,

Irina—take Asia with you. Koneko and Gasper are still unconscious, so evacuate them out of town."

"Go past the east gate," Azazel added. "There should be an underground shelter that way."

Rias nodded. "Understood. We'll use it as an emergency evacuation site. Everyone, please guide the townspeople to it! Asia, we'll need you to take care of the injured residents!"

"Got it."

"Leave it to us!"

Xenovia and Irina nodded, taking Koneko and Gasper into their arms.

"Yes, I understand!" Asia added, ready to go.

All right! We would redeploy into the castle town! I wouldn't let anyone say we didn't do everything we could to help! It wasn't fair for the ordinary townsfolk to get caught up in this evil dragon attack! We couldn't sit by and do nothing!

Azazel's black wings appeared as he conjured a spear of light. "I'll enter the fray, too! Let's go, you guys!"

"Right!" we said as one as we dispersed around the town.

"Take thiiisss!"

"Solid Impact Booster!"

As soon as I landed in the castle town, I set to rescuing residents under attack from the evil dragons, fighting the creatures off one by one. I had already transformed my right arm into its massive, supercharged form, delivering powerful punches that sent the monsters reeling!

Yep, I could take those mass-produced evil dragons down with a single hit. Seriously, they weren't anywhere near Grendel's or Crom Cruach's level.

Still, they were strong enough. If they were demons, they would have been midlevel at the very least, but we members of the Occult Research Club were strong enough to take care of them without too much trouble.

The problem was their sheer number. I had beaten four of them

already, but there were still countless more lurking about… Just how many anti-government vampires had let themselves be transformed by the Holy Grail?!

I shook my head in an effort to clear my thoughts as I called out to the fleeing residents. "There's a shelter outside the east gate! Go there!"

"Th-thank you!" the vampire townspeople said as they hurried away.

Now, then. I decided to take off into the sky to find where I was most needed.

Snow danced all around. Looking down, I saw fighters from both the Tsepesh and Carmilla sides fighting the evil dragons. Elmenhilde must have been among them somewhere, facing off against one or another of the creatures.

I unleashed a powerful Dragon Shot to support the vampires, knocking one of the transformed monsters to the ground. The vampires could no doubt handle it from there.

Next up… But just before I could change locations, a figure appeared before me in the air.

It was a man, with silver hair and clad in silver robes, his silhouette framed against the night sky.

"Red Dragon Emperor," he called out.

I recognized him at once.

"Euclid Lucifugus! Why are you coming after me?" I demanded.

Yes, this was the mastermind behind the attack on Kuou Academy and also Grayfia's brother, long thought dead—Euclid Lucifugus!

"I just happened to spot you while out running a little errand," he answered with a thin smile.

…So he was with Rizevim. Right, Vali mentioned he had fought this guy on his way here.

Euclid stared at the burning town with a cold stare. "What a twist of fate. Vampires, wishing to rid themselves of weakness, transformed into evil dragons attacking their homeland. They pride themselves on being vampires, yet they despise the vampire way of life. Such contradiction. And this is the end result."

"*You* pushed them into this!" I cried back.

"…I've always believed Longinuses have something that calls great truths into question," he said with a sigh. "They bestow new choices, not just for their host, but for all those around them. People always choose the new options. And as a result, everything falls apart."

…What was he blabbering about…?! This was no time for philosophizing!

"You and those around you are the inevitable result of choosing new options," he continued, unperturbed.

I could feel my anger getting the better of me.

"…Shut up already…!"

I changed my right fist into its solid impact mode and unleashed a punch straight for him.

Euclid, however, shook off his silver robe and stepped forward to meet the blow head-on. "Very well. It seems we're opponents. Is this fate? Then let me show you mine as well. Come forth, Boosted Gear!"

—?!

A red gauntlet appeared on Euclid's arm, just like my own! Another Boosted Gear?!

"—! What's going on?!"

Taken aback, I could only watch as he held up his gauntlet and boosted his aura.

"How about another one? Balance Breaker!"

With a red flash, Euclid's aura coalesced into a set of armor, strikingly similar to my own plate armor…! Sure, it was interspersed with patches of silver here and there, but it looked almost exactly like my own technique!

"…Boosted Gear Scale Mail…?!" I gawked.

"That's right," Euclid answered. "The Boosted Gear Scale Mail. Though a replica, I must admit."

"A replica?! Ridiculous! This Sacred Gear can't be duplicated! Not even Azazel could do that!"

Ddraig was taken aback and understandably so! Longinuses were one of a kind! No two identical Longinuses could exist

simultaneously! This wasn't like Valerie's Holy Grail earlier, where she had three pieces to make a single set!

"…How can research take anyone that far?!" Ddraig demanded. *"It isn't possible! Not even the biblical God could do that!"*

"Very true. Creating something from scratch would be beyond my capabilities. But it's a different story when you have the original to study," Euclid said, pointing to me with one finger. "Issei Hyoudou. You obtained a new body after meeting the Great Red in the dimensional void. But what happened to your original one?"

"…It was destroyed!"

Right. Ophis told me that my previous body, falling apart from Samael's poison, had served as the basis for my new one, created from a piece of the Great Red.

"…Suppose a single shred of it remained?" Euclid continued. "If we recovered it, could we use the power of the Holy Grail to extract information about the Red Dragon Emperor's soul and Sacred Gear?"

…No way.

…Retrieving a piece of my old body… From the dimensional void…?

"…"

Ddraig was at a loss for words.

"Unfortunately, we couldn't replicate Ddraig's soul," Euclid said, breaking the silence. "But we were able to reproduce your armor. The catch is that activating it requires the souls of several legendary dragons each time. Yes, it comes at an exorbitant cost."

Euclid's armor *was* different to mine in a few places. But no matter how you looked at it, it was undeniably my Boosted Gear Scale Mail!

"Shall we go to toe to toe, Red Dragon Emperor?" Euclid said, readying himself.

"Don't screw with me!"

I threw myself forward! There was no way I was losing to some copy! I refused to go down!

"Solid Impact Booster!"

I lashed out with my thickened right arm!

But just before I could make impact—

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

A sound echoed from his replica Sacred Gear, Euclid's aura surging dramatically!

…He stood firm, bracing himself to take the blow head-on.

The shock wave from the attack sent the snow falling through the night sky flying, but Euclid himself remained unscathed.

"Hmm. This is my first time seeing your crimson armor up close," he said, looking me up and down. "I don't think I can replicate it perfectly. But all the same…"

—!

…He delivered a solid punch into my abdomen, shattering my armor as the brutal force dug into my flesh… I doubled over, spitting out a mouthful of blood…

Dammit… Did this mean he was making better use of the Red Dragon Emperor's powers than I myself was…?

He stared down at me as I doubled over in agony. "I don't consider my abilities in any way inferior to those of my sister Grayfia… This proves that the stronger the host's innate strength, the greater the potential of the Boosted Gear Scale Mail."

…So it all came down to our innate abilities…?

…Grayfia was lauded as the most formidable Queen, practically at Demon King level. And someone of her caliber was sporting that Boosted Gear Scale Mail copy…

…I was using an upgraded version of it, but I still wasn't good enough…

"Impossible!"

I dashed forward again, unleashing a barrage of fresh blows!

But he dodged every last one of them, then launched into a counter!

"Dammit!"

"Star Sonic Booster!"

I rushed at him at full speed, but it was like he anticipated my every move, dodging effortlessly and striking me from behind with a blast of demonic energy! The impact almost knocked the breath from my lungs…!

…How about this, then?!

I activated the cannons in both my wings, charged them up, and locked on to my target!

"Crimson Blasteeerrr!"

"Fang Blast Booster!"

My ultimate technique! There was no way he would be able to withstand a direct hit from this! Unlike the last time we fought in that cramped underground space, we were in the open air now, which meant I could go all out with both cannons!

Two huge plumes of crimson aura fired from my twin cannons!

Euclid raised his hands in front of himself.

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

The voice of that replica Boosted Gear sounded once more, my foe's demonic energy swelling ominously!

"You called it a Dragon Shot, yes?" he said—and unleashed an immense aura of silver merged with red!

The two forces collided in the air above the castle town, triggering a huge, thunderous explosion!

When the bombardment ceased, Euclid emerged unscathed.

…He had canceled out my Crimson Blaster through a sheer surge of demonic energy?!

I was beyond shocked… Since when was that even possible…? Here I was, clad in my boosted crimson armor, and somehow it wasn't enough to overcome this copy of my Sacred Gear…?

It was just a regular Balance Breaker… Could it really draw this much power from just a stronger host…? It might have been a replica, but I was at a complete loss… No, maybe I was so poorly matched against it precisely *because* it was a replica…

I was about to give way to panic—when Ddraig scolded me!

"Get up, partner. We can't lose here, not to something like that. What he's wielding is an imitation, nothing more! There are only two Heavenly Dragons—me and Albion!" he growled, his voice filled with anger and fearless confidence. *"No! Me and Issei Hyoudou! We're the Red Dragon Emperor! We don't need anything or anyone else!"*

—!

That cry awoke something in me… Right. Yeah. We had faced countless battles together, and we had survived! We had forged ahead together…!

"I… *I'm* the Red Dragon Emperor!" I shouted, holding my left arm into the air. "I, Issei Hyoudou, am the one fighting by Ddraig's side! Neither of us is about to admit defeat to some fake!"

"Exactly!" Ddraig bellowed. *"There's no way a fake like you could understand the struggles we Heavenly Dragons have faced or our hosts' obsessions with breasts and backsides! There isn't room for any more Heavenly Dragons!"*

He sounded pretty cool there… Hold on—was that important right now?! I wanted to raise an objection—but at that moment, a sudden change fell over my armor.

The jewels embedded all throughout it started emitting flashes of white silver!

I—I had never seen anything like it before. If anything, it was kind of like Vali's Juggernaut Overdrive…

The light surrounded my body. The moment it faded, something else came out of those gemstones—a flurry of small white objects spewing forth!

"D-Ddraig! Something's coming out of the gemstones!" I gasped in shock.

"Ah. I'm just as surprised as you are. I was about to pour my emotions out when Albion's consciousness rushed into my mind. This hasn't happened since I risked my life to accept that jewel you added to your arm."

Back during my first fight with Vali, I had shattered his armor and embedded a jewel I took from it in my right arm.

The result was the Dividing Gear, an upgrade that turned my gauntlet a brilliant white and gave it Albion's ability of halving. However, the conditions for activating it and the associated risks were so high that I rarely brought the technique out for use.

…Were these palm-size dragon-shaped objects related to it in some way?

They didn't look like they were alive—more like they were made from the same material as my armor.

On closer inspection, I certainly could sense Vali's aura in them.

"…You should be able to control them to some degree," Ddraig said.

Hold on, did that mean I was drawing on my life force to create them?

"No. Strange though it is, they're only consuming your energy. Your life isn't in any danger."

That didn't sound too bad. So it was a battle of stamina, huh…? Well, my crimson armor took a toll on my energy as well, but if this helped me to hold my own, that was all that mattered!

"…Are those the powers you stole from the White Dragon Emperor?" Euclid asked. "Speaking of which, I crossed swords with the one known as Vali Lucifer not too long ago. Invigorating though the fight was, he never went all out with his Juggernaut Overdrive. So I asked him why he didn't show his true form. Do you know what his answer was?"

"…"

Next, he started parroting Vali's remarks back to me—words that I would never have seen coming.

"I'll only use my Juggernaut Overdrive against the Red Dragon Emperor, Issei Hyoudou. My pride won't allow me to waste it on a fake red dragon… You aren't the Red Dragon Emperor I want to do battle with."

—.

Did he really say that…?

So this was what it meant to have a rival, huh? I couldn't say I liked it when guys threw compliments my way, but I couldn't help but feel a little flattered by this one. Bring it on, Vali.

I didn't want to be lumped in with the *thing* in front of me, either!

Well, I might as well give these borrowed powers a try. They were a little different to the last time I used them, though!

I delved into the depths of my Sacred Gear to figure out the best way to use them… Right, this was something else… Depending on how I did it, this technique could be quite powerful indeed…

I imagined those tiny white dragons dancing around in my head… Was this what I was supposed to do? I started visualizing some

pretty outlandish movements…

"Hmm. Give the order, partner!" Ddraig said.

I decided to put them to the test! At that moment, the Roman numeral X floated up onto the jewel in my gauntlet.

"Go, little flying dragons!" I shouted—and they darted toward Euclid at breakneck speed!

They were much faster than I thought! What a pleasant surprise!

The small dragons soared gracefully through the air as they encircled Euclid, who in turn scanned his surroundings, trying to gauge their next moves.

At that moment, I unleashed a Dragon Shot straight at him!

"Eat this!"

A huge mass of demonic energy shot forth from my hand! He moved to the side to dodge it, and yet—

"Reflect!"

A voice sounded when the Dragon Shot struck one of the white dragons, and the projectile bounced against a wall of condensed light!

The reflected attack hit him square in the face! Yes, one of the abilities these mini dragons had was to reflect attacks!

It could reflect attacks up to a certain power level, even my own. That being said, they would shatter if hit with exceptional force…

Euclid, caught off guard, scrambled to regain his footing, but I unleashed a barrage of Dragon Shots one after another!

"Gooo! Reflect Dragon Shot!"

The attacks fell on him from all angles! Realizing he had lost the upper hand, Euclid raised his gauntlet, when—

"Reflect!"

All at once, the small dragons flitted about, swooping to snatch my Dragon Shots and reflected them at him with pinpoint precision!

Reflected from all directions, the chaotic barrage converged on Euclid!

"Reflect!" "Reflect!" "Reflect!" "Reflect!" "Reflect!" "Reflect!" "Reflect!"

With each ricochet, more Dragon Shots barreled toward him! He kept on dodging, but that only meant they were reflected back at

him again from new angles! The ones that hit definitely caused damage!

"Gah!"

Abandoning any attempt to dodge or deflect my attacks, he decided to try neutralizing my Dragon Shots instead.

Yeah, that would be the best course of action. But you know what, Euclid? I've learned a thing or two from my encounters with Cao Cao!

I unleashed yet another Dragon Shot, when—

"Tuuurrrnnn!"

I made it change trajectory! It skimmed past him just moments before it would have struck, drawing a wide arc!

"Reflect!"

The next moment, it suddenly bounced back and hit!

Red smoke billowed from Euclid's body, his armor tattered and worn.

…Well, I was almost at my limit over here. The energy level on my gauntlet gem had fallen to II.

That number wasn't referring to the length of time I could maintain my armor—rather, it was the limit of those white dragons. The more I used them, the faster the number dropped.

I wouldn't have many more chances to use their reflection ability, which meant it was time for decisive action!

The next moment, Euclid's demonic aura swelled by several orders of magnitude.

"…It seems my defenses aren't up to par. No matter. Let's send out an even greater force this time! And unlike your bombardment, there's no need to charge this one!"

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

A voice sounded from his replica Sacred Gear for a third time, causing his aura to swell formidably.

Then, without so much as pausing, he unleashed a devastating surge of demonic energy.

It was quite something, certainly too dangerous for me to take on directly. And yet—

I sent commands to my small dragons, and they darted around to line up and intercept the attack!

His strike came straight for me, when—

"Divide!" "Divide!" "Divide!" "Divide!" "Divide!" "Divide!" "Divide!" "Divide!"

I took that wave of energy head-on, dividing its strength again and again!

Each time it hit one of my miniature dragons, the barrage diminished in potency. By the time it reached me, it was so weak I could simply flick it away with my hand.

"…"

Euclid was left stupefied by this result.

This was another of my miniature dragons' abilities—the power of reduction. Basically, this was the White Dragon Emperor's original ability. And with these dragons able to fly through the air at will, there was no better means of defense!

A large number of the dragons disintegrated from the force of the damage, but they weren't lost forever. I could just summon them again whenever I needed them.

Come to think of it, this was Albion's innate ability. Did that mean the reflection power came from him, too…?

But why were they surfacing now? It wasn't like I awakened these new powers or anything, right? I couldn't say I felt like I had grown in any way. It was more like they were flowing from Ddraig himself…

"I don't know," he said. *"But I've felt lighter ever since that conversation with Albion earlier. Especially my mind! I was in a bright and cheerful mood. Then he went and made fun of us Heavenly Dragons, and I was overcome with anger. And when that happened, Albion's consciousness spoke to my mind.*

"'You and I are the only Heavenly Dragons. Your pain is mine, and my pain is yours. We're not one, but we'll overcome these struggles together!'"

Apparently, that was what he said, Ddraig explained, overcome with emotion.

"We're not one… I'm not afraid of breasts of backsides anymore."

His voice, I couldn't fail to notice, had regained its past dignity…

…W-was this because of their shared pain? Because of my becoming the Breast Dragon? Was that what triggered this weird development…?

I—I couldn't say for sure, but that was a question for later.

Despite having been beaten back, Euclid let out a defiant laugh. His armor mended itself before my eyes with a bright red flash.

"Interesting. Yes, fascinating… I suppose that's enough for a warm-up."

His aura swelled even further, and it wasn't just being amplified by his replica Sacred Gear. No, this was a raw, primal energy coming from his very essence…

Indeed. He claimed to be just as strong as Grayfia, so this was no doubt where the real show began…

Had he just been probing me to gauge my response? After all, mine was the original Boosted Gear. It wouldn't be surprising if he wanted to see my moves and techniques firsthand to compare them against his own.

And he certainly was scrutinizing my responses…

Dammit. My energy was running low, and my armor was on the brink of deactivating.

"Show me more of the Red Dragon Emperor's true strength," he said before falling suddenly silent.

Why? Because *something* covered the town below in pitch-black. The castle, the streets, the buildings—everything was enveloped in shadow.

I had seen this before. Of course. We had witnessed the exact same thing below the castle just a short time ago.

"…Is that Gasper?!" I exclaimed, glancing around when the air beside me began to warp.

Slowly, more darkness emerged from the rift and took on a distinct form—Gasper, transformed into that shadowy beast.

"Issei! Let me help!" he said, positioning himself beside me.

"You woke up?"

"Yes. Asia told me what happened… This is no time to rest," Gasper said in a low, angry voice, his eyes glowing an eerie red.

The entire castle town below was shrouded in darkest darkness.

…What kind of scale was this?! He could really dominate an entire town?! Just how powerful *were* his abilities?! It was no wonder he was considered Longinus-class!

The mass-produced evil dragons rampaging about were consumed by waves of darkness swelling up from the ground.

It was overwhelming. A flash of light shone from Gasper's Evil Eyes, freezing the dragons in place. One by one, they were wiped from the face of the earth.

The townspeople, however, were unharmed. Gasper's targets were just those evil dragons. He even extinguished the flames raging in the damaged buildings.

"I can't stand to see Valerie's stolen powers misused like this," he said, fixing his gaze on Euclid.

"Absolutely!" I nodded in agreement, readying myself to keep fighting.

My stamina was waning, and it wouldn't be long before my armor deactivated—but so long as I had Gasper by my side, our odds were unassailable.

All we had to do was take down this opponent and capture him. Then we could send him down to the underworld and clear any doubts about Grayfia's loyalties!

But just before we could launch a fresh attack—

"Euclid!"

A silver-haired man—Rizevim Livan Lucifer—approached.

"Master Rizevim."

Rizevim took his place beside Euclid and let out a boisterous laugh. "All right, time to withdraw. Ha-ha-ha, that darkness is straight-up wild. It's even taking down our evil dragons. Where's Crom Cruach?"

"I believe he's left."

"Hah? Talk about a free spirit. Ha-ha-ha!" he laughed, somehow managing to find humor in the situation.

Just then, Vali burst in on his shimmering wings.

"Rizevim! We're not finished!"

But the older demon let out a hearty laugh. "Oh? You keep

buzzing around, kid. It's time for me to get out of here. We've wreaked enough havoc in this town, so let's head back, Euclid. Use that forced teleportation spell."

Euclid wasted no time deploying a teleportation square in midair.

As if we were just going to let them escape! The three of us—me, Vali, Gasper—closed in on them!

"Wait, Rizevim!"

"Hold it right there, Euclid!"

"Give back Valerie's Holy Grail!"

But the waves of energy we released had no effect whatsoever on Rizevim, fizzling out the moment they hit him.

Was he negating our Sacred Gears again?!

"Tch, tch, tch." Rizevim waved his finger from side to side. "Too bad, I'm afraid! Your abilities are tied to your Sacred Gears, so they won't work on me! Catch you later! We'll be seeing each other again real soon for more grand acts of terror, and I'll bring the legendary evil dragon with me next time!"

Dammit! Was he saying our every move would be completely ineffective?!

The three of us all had Sacred Gears! I couldn't believe we had been stymied so easily…!

As the light of their teleportation square started to fade, Rizevim came out with one last declaration. "Ah, right. Our group's name—it's Qlippoth. Pretty cool, huh? It's the opposite of the Tree of Life, Sephirot. I picked it because we're putting the Holy Grail to new uses, seeing as it bears the name of the Sephirot and all. It also sounds pretty evil, don'cha think? Ha!"

With that, Rizevim, Euclid, and Lilith disappeared into the light of their teleportation square…

I couldn't fail to notice Lilith look my way one last time before vanishing…

"…My dream was to defeat the Great Red…," Vali said, his body quivering with rage. "Dammit… You're saying my goal was the same as his…?! No! I—I'm not like him…!"

I had never seen him so emotional before…

He must have truly despised his grandfather…

Heck, I hated him, too.
Rizevim Livan Lucifer—he was far too dangerous a foe.

Gasper Balor

With Rizevim's departure and the end of the attacks from the vampires-turned-evil dragon, the darkness lifted over the Tsepesh town… But the damage was nothing short of horrific.

Everything, from the roads to the buildings, had been utterly devastated.

The surviving Tsepesh and Carmilla agents were still evacuating the residents to safety, while a rescue team led by Asia was focusing on the injured in the underground shelter beyond the east gate.

As for me, I made my way back to the castle with Gasper, now reverted to his original form… It, too, lay in ruins, battered from the dragon assault.

All at once, I spotted a woman lying slumped on the ground—Elmenhilde.

"…Why…? Traitors…turning into evil dragons… Our homeland… What am I supposed to do now…?" she muttered in a daze.

…She must have learned from the agents supporting her that the Carmilla town had fallen under attack, just like the Tsepesh one. In fact, Azazel had told us just a few minutes ago that Heaven's Brave Saints had intervened to drive away the mass-produced evil dragons.

The damage in the Carmilla town was said to be even worse than over here. According to Azazel, it would take both sides a long time to rebuild.

Traitors among the Carmilla vampires had succumbed to the allure of the Holy Grail, ultimately being transformed into dragons that attacked the town.

Marius must have brought forward his plans to retrieve the Holy Grail after rumors started leaking among the Carmilla. No doubt that was how Elmenhilde and her agents knew about it.

While I stood there struggling to find the right words to say to her, Gasper emerged from deeper in the castle carrying Valerie on his back. She hadn't been with us when Rizevim teleported us to the castle tower earlier, so Gasper went back alone to find her.

I was just about to go help him when I noticed a figure standing nearby—Gasper's father.

"…"

The head of the Vladi family stared at Gasper in silence.

"I'm a member of Rias Gremory's Familia!" Gasper declared without shrinking back. "I'm her Bishop! And my name is Gasper!" He bowed his head. "Thank you for everything you've done for me. But I won't be coming back. And I'm taking Valerie with me." He passed his father in the corridor, delivering these final words: "Our home is in Japan now."

The head of the Vladi family closed his eyes, saying nothing.

I felt a stirring in me—my junior well and truly was a man of the Gremory Familia.

To the best of my knowledge, that was the last conversation between father and son.

Three hours had passed since the attack. Dawn was fast approaching.

It would soon be time for the vampires to go to sleep. Most would spend the day in the underground shelter.

We members of the Occult Research Club, along with Bennia and Rugal, gathered in the town's central square.

After the underground battle, Bennia and Rugal had gone to help take care of the evil dragons on the surface. How diligent of them! As to be expected of members of the Sitri Familia!

As for Vali…he had vanished without a trace. Where could he have gone…? That pained look on his face the last time I saw him lingered in my mind. Azazel said he would go find him later.

Meanwhile, he looked Valerie over once more.

"Just like I thought, we'll need the third Holy Grail, the one Rizevim stole, to restore her consciousness. That Holy Grail was a

set of three, and she was only barely managing to hold on after Rizevim took the first one… Her mind must have shut down once the second was extracted. The only way to fix it will be to restore the Sacred Gear to its original state."

So it was inevitable—we were going to have to deal with Rizevim and his reborn Khaos Brigade, that Qlippoth group.

"But why did they only extract one of the three Holy Grails?" I asked.

Unlike Marius, Rizevim was fully aware that Valerie's was a variant-type Holy Grail. So why didn't he take more than one?

"…I can think of a few political reasons for keeping the vampires around, but there's probably a simpler answer," Azazel said. "I'm guessing he realized more than one would be too difficult to control. From what he said, it sounds like he can still activate its Balance Breaker with just the one. On top of that, I get the feeling only one was active when Marius had Valerie use it. Maybe her body couldn't take the strain of using two or more simultaneously… Well, we're going to have to wait before we get any definitive answers."

Right. So one was more than enough. Any more might be too difficult to handle. Considering the magnitude of what a single one of them had wrought—enhancing those vampires and later transforming them into evil dragons—it clearly was an exceptional power.

I had another question about my own ability this time.

"Teach? About that ability I used…"

I would never have imagined my White Dragon Emperor powers to reemerge like that. The Dividing Gear had vanished, changing form into those miniature reflecting dragons.

Azazel tilted his head in thought. "That's probably less you evolving and more Ddraig undergoing a new awakening… Maybe the fact the Two Heavenly Dragons had an honest conversation was the key? I'd better look into it in more detail… Vali as well…"

So this also needed looking into… I knew it—I was responsible for both Heavenly Dragons' mental turmoil, along with their reconciliation.

Yep, it was all so complicated! I didn't know what to think! At

least Ddraig was feeling better!

Azazel breathed a sigh. "Then there's that replica Boosted Gear Issei told us about… It's safe to assume it was made through some reckless combination of artificial Sacred Gear technology, cloning, and the Holy Grail. So long as Ddraig resides in Issei, it's impossible for two Boosted Gears to exist. It really is just a crude replica. The problem is the person using it is already extremely skilled, so he can pull off tricks similar to the original. Take the user out of the equation, and there's no way it could ever surpass the original."

…So basically, my base stats were greatly inferior to Euclid's… Well, it was true. I could barely do anything at all without my Boosted Gear.

…It was so frustrating. I needed to train harder to close the gap! After all, I was already drawing on the powers of Ophis and the Great Red! I wished I could unleash even a fraction of that strength!

While I was busy fretting, Gasper reached out to caress Valerie's cheek.

"Thank you for watching over her, Azazel." He stood up and turned to the rest of us. "President Rias, Issei. I've made up my mind," he declared, his gaze firm and unwavering. "I'm going to retrieve the Holy Grail."

—. Under the light of the rising sun, our heroic daywalker stood tall, majestic, and dignified.

"I'll get stronger, and I'll take the Holy Grail back from those leeches… I swear, I'll make Valerie whole again… And then she'll be able to start over…!" he shouted, choking on his words as he fought back tears. "I'll save her!"

…Here he was coming out with such a masculine declaration. He really had grown up quickly.

"We'll take it back, Gasper!" I said, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

"Yes! I'll help beat them all!"

What a brave face he was making!

Living to save the woman who had once saved you—now that was a goal worthy of any man!

Yep, he would be a strong one; that was for sure.

After all, he was a man of the Gremory Familia—just like me and Kiba.

Valerie, still unconscious, was readied for transportation to the Grigori Research Institute, while the rest of us set off back to Japan.

Life.DxD

Five days after the devastating terrorist attacks on the Tsepesh and Carmilla castle towns, we awaited the responses of the various mythologies from our base in Japan. Rizevim's reappearance had sent the underworld, Heaven, and a whole lot of other groups into a frenzy.

That was only natural. Rizevim was using evil dragons as agents of chaos and was even trying to resurrect the legendary beast Trihexa. He had basically declared war on the entire world.

The chief deities of the various mythologies were quick to recognize this as a crisis of the highest order, wasting no time to make peace with one another to discuss how best to counter Rizevim Livan Lucifer and his Qlippoth group.

In all their history, this was quite possibly the first international issue, if you could call it that, to transcend religion and philosophy across the various mythos…

Rizevim and his group hadn't taken any action since the incident, but the forces of each mythos remained on high alert.

A meeting was convened at Kuou Academy in the dead of night.

It comprised the Occult Research Club, the student council, Azazel, Sister Griselda, the Joker Dulio, Slash Dog Tobio Ikuse, Sairaorg, Seekvaira Agares, and even the first-generation Sun Wukong, not to mention Vali's entire team.

What a lineup. I would never have expected the old Sun Wukong to show his face. It was like the most famous fighters from the different mythos had all come together in one place.

"…How are the leaders of the various mythologies planning to respond?" Rias asked once everyone was present.

"Sure enough, they've decided this is just too big to ignore. Even the ones who have been uncooperative up till now are willing to sit

down and talk," Azazel answered.

…Right. So the higher-ups from the different mythologies were taking Rizevim seriously this time.

"That bastard Rizevim is trying to plunge the world—and that other one, too—into chaos…," Azazel continued. "He's already unleashed destruction on an alarming scale in the vampire territory."

…There were plenty of victims on the vampire side as well after the attack in the Tsepesh castle town.

There was no doubt the terrorists were about to try something terrible.

Azazel let out a sigh. "One mythology in particular has come out with some rather radical statements, suggesting military intervention shouldn't be ruled out. The chief gods like Odin and Zeus are trying to cool tensions…but who can say what will happen if these terror attacks continue? Evil dragons have always been seen as a threat—that's why they were wiped out in the first place—and now they're out rampaging all at once. And to make matters worse, they're being led by none other than Lucifer's own son. Even those who thought the last incident in the underworld didn't concern them—the ones who considered it a fire across the river—have realized the gravity of the situation… If Trihexa is resurrected and starts fighting the Great Red, they could end up destroying the whole world."

"—!"

We were rendered speechless by this pronouncement.

…If the Great Red and Trihexa clashed, the devastation would be off the charts. It was no wonder the higher-ups from all the different factions were springing into action!

The damage would have been immense if Ophis and the Great Red fought, but fortunately, that battle never came to pass. The Khaos Brigade's leaders may have tricked Ophis into helping them, but they understood just how perilous that confrontation would be and made sure the situation never got that far.

But this time was different. Rizevim had clearly come out with his intention to pit Trihexa against the Great Red with the goal of destroying him. I couldn't even begin to imagine what would happen to the dimensional void if the Great Red was lost, but it certainly

wouldn’t by anything good.

Rias picked up where Azazel left off. “The uncooperative groups were under the impression the Khaos Brigade was only targeting the three great powers, so they thought they could stay out of it while we dealt with the issue ourselves. But they understand just how much of a risk Rizevim Livan Lucifer poses. If he really has turned terrorist… Well, they can’t afford to ignore him anymore.”

So the leaders of the various different mythos knew just how crazy he was… Well, it was clear he was off his rocker from the moment I laid eyes on him.

“Don’t look so grim,” Azazel chuckled. “It’s not like we’re under attack from another group here. We’ve just found a common enemy this time around.”

“Archangel Michael is negotiating with the other forces on behalf of the Lord,” Sister Griselda announced. “Many mythologies are already seeking assistance, and some of them have taken reassurance from Archangel Michael’s guidance.”

Way to go, Michael! As to be expected from Heaven’s top angel!

“The leaders have come up with a proposal,” Azazel said, raising a finger.

The rest of us listened on with bated breath.

“If both major vampire clans can be overrun like this, it’s only natural the other factions are all worried about their futures. They all boast at least one crazy strong deity, but they can’t just go off and fight these terrorists themselves. So we need a counterterrorism team made up of individuals capable of competing toe-to-toe with Rizevim and his thugs and who can be deployed at a moment’s notice.”

A counterterrorism team! We definitely needed something like that!

But if he was bringing this up with us… The others seemed to suspect the same thing I did.

Azazel glanced at each of us in turn. “The team’s members will need to be extraordinarily capable, and they’ll also require free rein. All of you here are already a team of sorts. We’ve got demons, fallen angels, angels, vampires, *youkai*, Valkyries, grim reapers, beastmen,

humans, and dragons. Not a bad mixed team, I'll say. You're also incredibly agile."

The Rookies Four, Azazel and Slash Dog, the reincarnated angel Irina, Griselda, the Joker, the dragon kings, and the original Sun Wukong—it was a pretty diverse ensemble, able to pack a punch and go where needed at short notice!

No one present seemed to be opposed to this idea.

"I'm in favor," Rias said. "At times like this, we need to combine our strengths."

We members of her Familia nodded.

"I have no problem with it," Sairaorg added. "I'll fight alongside Rias and Issei Hyoudou."

"No objections here," Chairwoman Sona said.

"Likewise." Seekvaira Agares nodded. "Though it seems I'll be serving more of a support role."

"I don't mind. Young'uns are easier to work with than old codgers—that's for sure," Sun Wukong agreed.

Wow! His support was really something!

The Joker, Dulio, however, tilted his head to one side. "Hmm," he murmured.

"What's wrong? You don't agree?" Azazel asked.

"I just thought we probably need a name is all."

Ah, right. A name. Calling it a counterterrorism team all the time would be a bit of a mouthful.

"…DxD," Koneko murmured.

The rest of us turned to look at her, causing her to blush under all the attention.

"It's a mixed team of different types of beings, so I thought it would be a good fit…," she whispered.

"What does *DxD* mean?" Rias asked. "*Dragon of Dragons*, like the Great Red?"

"No. I think *D* stands for demon, dragon, downfall, doom, that sort of thing," Koneko answered.

Right. *DxD* could mean demons and dragons or something like that.

Azazel nodded thoughtfully. "Well, you could cobble together all

sorts of combinations with the letter *D*. And you are going to need a name. Yes, DxD… It might make sense, especially as our goal is to protect the Great Red. I'm okay with it, but what about the rest of you?"

"As long as we don't get labeled something weird, I'm fine. DxD should work." Dulio nodded, giving his okay.

"Anything is fine. I'll leave this to the young'uns," Sun Wukong said. He didn't seem to mind either way.

But a team this strong brought with it a fresh new set of concerns.

"…With all of us teaming up, won't some of the other forces get their backs up?" I asked Azazel.

After all, even if the top brass gave their approval, those below them might still consider us too dangerous a unit.

"Well, there's no helping that. No one's more qualified than all you, though, so there's a perfectly good justification for this." He paused there for a moment, resting a hand on my shoulder. "Breasts are justice. You're the Breast Dragon, so you had better accept that's how it's gonna work."

"I-is that really okay…?" I stammered.

Azazel pointed to Rias's chest. "Take a look at them, Issei. Don't they feel like justice to you?"

…

I stared hard at Rias's breasts. Ah, how magnificent they were! My girlfriend's breasts. They were the very pinnacle of perfection. Round, soft, lush—their mere existence felt like a declaration of justice!

Yep! I was starting to see what Azazel meant!

"Y-yes! They *do* feel like justice!"

Azazel draped an arm around my shoulder. "That's the spirit! You've got your noble cause now! The rest of you had better come to terms with it! This is the counterterrorism task force DxD's ultimate mission!"

"Breasts are justice!" I echoed.

Breasts were justice! That was good enough for me! With that thought, I could fight for peace! After all, peace was what made

breasts shine! Everyone else could roll their eyes and breathe exasperated sighs, but so what?!

With that, Azazel steadied himself and pointed next to Dulio. "We're gonna need a leader… That's a job for you, Joker."

"…"

Caught off guard, Dulio was left momentarily speechless—then let out a panicked shout. "Whaaat?! M-m-meee?! Why?! No, no, no, hold on! You're serious?!"

Whoa, that was unexpected. Huh. So Dulio was the kind of guy who got all flustered when put on the spot?

"It would be bad for appearances to let a demon or fallen angel take the helm. They've got an unshakable reputation as villains, right?" Azazel continued. "Angels, though, they've got all these positive connotations. There are no downsides. All the better with an angel reincarnated from a human—that puts humans in a good light as well."

That made sense. When it came to a public-facing leader, an angel would be the most appealing.

"Wh-what…? Just because of that…? I—I'm not… I mean, I'm not into that sort of thing…," Dulio mumbled.

"This is an immense honor, Dulio," Sister Griselda said. "You might very well carve your name into the annals of history. You have to seize the opportunity. No, you *will* seize it. As Heaven's trump card, it's your duty to take action."

Eventually, Dulio yielded to her pressure. "Ah… All right. I understand. I'll do it!" he said, before turning to address the rest of us. "Um, it looks like I'm our leader. Let's give it our all."

He seemed like a somewhat unreliable captain, but with his abilities and position, I had high expectations for him. Besides, no one voiced any opposition to him leading us.

Azazel turned next to Sun Wukong. "All right if you take the role of deputy leader? I know it's an extra burden…"

"Yes, yes. It's only natural for the young'uns to take the lead. I'll cover them when things get tough."

So the original Sun Wukong was our deputy leader!

Awesome! With the Joker taking the lead and Sun Wukong

backing him up, this was going to be one wild team!

"Vali," Azazel said, addressing Team Vali in the corner of the room. "I've suggested you guys join this mixed team to bolster our defenses against Rizevim. It should also help to dispel some of the mistrust hanging over your heads."

Vali was still considered a terrorist by many of the major powers on account of his past involvement with the Khaos Brigade. Did Azazel hope that his participation in Team DxD could help alleviate that perception?

More importantly, having Vali with us would definitely strengthen the team.

…But I was sure some of those gathered wouldn't be particularly happy about it. I could already see that Seekvaira Agares wasn't at all pleased.

"…Albion," Vali called out to the dragon inside him. "What do you think about teaming up with your nemesis?"

"I don't mind," Albion answered out loud so the rest of us could hear. *"Red! Let's talk about that battle we had a thousand years ago."*

"I don't mind, either. Hey, White? It should be fun revisiting the old days."

…Huh. It sounded like the two of them had more important things to discuss than this new team.

"…You two seem awfully close lately," Vali said with a hint of confusion.

"When we stand together, we need not fear breast or backside," Albion answered cheerfully. *"Isn't that right, Red?"*

"Yeah! Whether breasts or buttocks, bring it on! We won't give in!"

Ddraig sounded like he was on the mend, too!

"Right."

What was with this sudden shift in personality from the Two Heavenly Dragons?!

"…To think the Two Heavenly Dragons' long-standing grudge could be resolved over something like this… Life is full of surprises." Sairaorg shook his head.

…Yeah, it seemed *I* was the reason they had been able to find closure. You never knew what was in store for you, huh…?

Even Azazel was taken aback. "Because of this, Issei's undergone a change we've never seen before. The way the Two Heavenly Dragons are growing lately is just plain baffling. I'm at a loss… So the secret is in breasts and buttocks, huh?"

"Don't act so shocked!" I protested.

I sure hadn't planned for them to power-up because of this!

"Isn't it still a big deal that Vali Lucifer and his friends were complicit with the Khaos Brigade?" Chairwoman Sona asked, one hand raised into the air.

Azazel scratched at his cheek. "About that… Old man Odin has offered to officially adopt him, knowing full well what that entails."

—!

Talk about a surprise. Who would have thought Odin would suggest something like that?

"Can't *you* adopt him, Teach?" I asked. "I mean, you're technically his guardian, aren't you…?"

Azazel shook his head. "I used to be the head of the fallen angels. Like I said earlier, fallen angels and demons just aren't as reputable as angels or the gods of other mythologies. So long as the Bible labels us as villains, there's no saving our image."

Well, demons and fallen angels were typically bad guys…

"But old Odin's a different story," he said to Vali. "He's a big-name old god. If he says he wants to adopt you, no one from Asgard or any of the other realms would dare to complain. There would be strings attached, probably some restrictions, too, but you should be able to move about a whole lot easier than you can now. So what do you think about becoming his adopted son?"

Vali sank into thought for a long moment. "It's mutually beneficial, so I'll cooperate. Beyond that, I prefer to go my own way."

Azazel chuckled. "I guess I can take that as yes, then?"

Instead of answering him directly, Vali turned to Kuroka and Le Fay. "I'll leave these two with you. If they're needed, I'll call for them… Kuroka, Le Fay? I trust you to handle things."

"You can count on us, *meow*," Kuroka said with a salute.

Ah… It sounded like these two were going to be staying with us in the Hyoudou residence long-term…

"Le Fay?" Arthur, wielder of the Holy King Sword Collbrande, addressed his sister.

"Y-yes?"

"This is a golden opportunity. You should join this team. You're certainly deserving of a pardon… Red Dragon Emperor?" he said, turning my way.

"What?"

"If you haven't entered into a mage pact yet, maybe you could consider one with my sister? If she can enter into an agreement with you, a hero of the underworld, it should hopefully help her return home someday."

—.

So it had come to this. Le Fay's skills would be a huge boon to our team, and her joining would certainly help to clear her name.

"I'll give it serious consideration," I said.

Arthur's smile was a rare display of genuine emotion, not at all like his usual faint grin. "I appreciate it. I promise to repay this debt one day."

"As for your position…," Azazel said to Kuroka. "You'll be a house guest at the Hyoudou residence, I suppose? We'll keep you here under the pretense Rias and Issei will be keeping an eye on you. Does that work?"

"Ah, you have a way of spinning things, Governor. So I'll be a guest at their table? I'm looking forward to it, *meow*."

A-a guest at our table…? She sure ate a lot. She claimed it all went to her breasts, so maybe it was okay, but she still needed to pull her weight.

The first-generation Sun Wukong nudged Bikou. "I'll call you when you're needed. Don't refuse."

"…Don't overdo it, old man. Fighting evil dragons will take a toll on your aging body."

"Just as long as it doesn't kill me."

Maybe we would get a chance to see a Sun Wukong double-

team?

With that thought, a question came to mind.

"I'm all behind setting up this A-team, but what exactly are we supposed to do now…?" I asked Azazel.

"Just keep doing what you always do. You don't expect us to be out in the field all the time, do you? It's a big group, so it won't exactly be easy to mobilize everyone all at once. Each of you has your own role to play. When something happens, those best positioned to move will get in touch and work together. That's the point of this team. Basically, it's an official way for you all to collaborate."

Ah, so that was the idea.

In general, we would respond to incidents individually. After all, we couldn't just upend our lives overnight.

This would no doubt be easier for all of us, and if it looked like things were going to get out of hand, we could bring in the whole team.

The first-generation Sun Wukong stepped forward. "Now, then. Any of you young'uns looking to get stronger?"

"—. What do you mean?" Rias asked.

Sun Wukong's wrinkled lips curled in a grin. "I'll retrain you from the ground up… You had better reach the standard of high-class demons or angels; otherwise there would be no point to all this. I expect you all to reach the highest caliber."

—!

The original Sun Wukong was going to train us! Given how formidable those evil dragons were, it made sense we needed to bolster our strength. And what could be more reassuring than him showing us the ropes?!

"Something tells me you won't just be fighting evil dragons," he continued. "You'll no doubt be pitted against other threats from every corner of the world."

Azazel nodded. "He's right. I envision Team DxD becoming a trump card for both the supernatural realm and the human world."

A trump card for the supernatural realm and the human world.

Sun Wukong shook his head. "You can pull off some flashy tricks,

but if you ask me, you're still just fledglings. You wouldn't stand a chance against those evil dragons the way you are now."

"I can take pride in the fact my Juggernaut Overdrive can break through a god's defenses, though," Vali said with a defiant grin.

"That's true. You definitely are at that level. In terms of raw power output, you could probably rival the gods from certain mythologies. But here's the rub—if you don't have the stamina to maintain that output, it's of no earthly use. How long to do you think you could keep your Juggernaut Overdrive up? Would you count it in minutes? Or seconds maybe?"

"…"

Vali couldn't refute this critique. His Juggernaut Overdrive certainly did deplete his energy reserves incredibly quickly.

If the enemy caught wind of that vulnerability, they would no doubt devise countermeasures to wait him out.

Well, they would have to be crazy strong to do that, though…

"You're no match for Crom Cruach the way you are now," Sun Wukong continued. "You might be able to deliver a hit stronger than he can, but what if you need a second attack to finish the job? Or a third one? If you ask me, you white and red dragons have been wasting your energy on flashy displays of power."

Now that was harsh! Harsh but true! My True Queen state especially used too much energy. If I could rein it in a little, I could probably improve my approach to combat.

And then there was my newfound ability. I had to master those miniature dragons. It looked like I had a lot of work ahead.

Sun Wukong glanced at the rest of us. "I'll train these Two Heavenly Dragons from the ground up. And I'll teach you how to hold your own against those evil dragons. With your Longinuses, you might have to fight god-class enemies one day. I'll prepare you for that eventuality."

"…We might have to fight gods…?" Sairaorg asked skeptically.

Sun Wukong twirled his pipe between his fingers. "Gods are always vying for supremacy. Far more often than you probably realize," he said, his lips curling in a grin. "Well, let's focus on the more immediate threat—that ruffian Rizevim Livan Lucifer. I've

always thought people like you, born with your Longinuses, are bound by destiny to achieve great things."

"…'Bound by destiny'?" I repeated.

Sun Wukong addressed me directly. "Those things are meant for destroying gods. Their reappearance in the world is no mere glitch in the Sacred Gear system. If you ask me, they've come back because the world needs them."

Counterterrorism Special Task Force *DxD*

Leader: Dulio Gesualdo, Heaven (Longinus: Zenith Tempest) Deputy Leader: Sun Wukong (first generation; reverting to original name after returning to active duty), Mount Sumeru Technical Adviser and General Supervisor: Azazel, underworld (affiliated with the governor; former governor) Members

- Sairaorg Bael's Familia, underworld (Longinus: Regulus Nemea)
- Seekvaira Agares's Familia, underworld
- Rias Gremory's Familia, underworld (Longinus: Boosted Gear)
- Sona Sitri's Familia, underworld
- Brave Saints (Griselda Quarta, Irina Shidou), Heaven
- Tobio Ikuse, human (affiliated with the Grigori; Longinus: Canis Lycaon)
- Red Dragon Emperor Ddraig, Two Heavenly Dragons
- Gigantis Dragon Fafnir, Five Great Dragon Kings
- Mischievous Dragon Yulong, Five Great Dragon Kings
- Prison Dragon Vritra, Five Great Dragon Kings

Provisional Members

- Team Vali Lucifer, demons, *youkai*, humans, mages, and monsters (Longinus: Divine Dividing)
- White Dragon Emperor Albion, Two Heavenly Dragons

New Life

Once the team was formed and the plans were agreed upon, the members of Team DxD went their separate ways for the time being. It wasn't long before everyone else had left the old school building, leaving only us members of the Occult Research Club remaining.

"I guess it's decided, Ravel… I'd like to enter into a pact with Le Fay."

"If that's what you want, Issei. Let's consider a full-fledged contract, then."

Before I knew it, my manager Ravel and I were deep in conversation about my entering into a mage pact with Le Fay.

If teaming up was enough to exonerate her, if not erase her past, then I was willing to do it. Ravel responded more positively this time around as well.

All right! It sounded like it was settled! There would probably be all sorts of challenges ahead, but we would just have to tackle them one by one…! I would shatter every obstacle that crossed my path!

Rias rose to her feet, looking at each of us in turn. "Now that this new team has come together, we can't let Rizevim Livan Lucifer's actions go unchallenged." She took a deep breath, then spoke loud and clear. "We're not going to just sit back and take it. We all need to grow stronger together!"

"Right!" we answered as one.

And so, with renewed determination, we got ready for our coming training sessions with the first-generation Sun Wukong…

True Longinus

"Ha-ha-ha! You're back soon—quicker than I thought! So how did the underworld treat you, Cao Cao?"

"…You're a cruel god, asking that after leaving us there, Sakra."

"How are Georg and Leonardo hanging?"

"…Georg has started studying magic in the underworld. He won't be coming back any time soon. Leonardo decided to go with him."

"Ha-ha-ha! Man, you Longinus users are whack. But whatever, a promise is a promise. You can have the Holy Spear back."

"More importantly, has something happened?"

"Perfect timing for you to hop on this ride, huh? I'll smooth things over with the other factions. If you wanna consider yourself chosen by the Holy Spear, then prove it… You're gonna help take down Lucifer and some evil dragons."

"…Lucifer… Evil dragons…"

Afterword

Long time no see. Ishibumi here. *High School DxD* has now reached its sixteenth volume!

Let's talk a little about Gasper.

This latest volume of the series is basically Gasper's homecoming story. We've witnessed his continuous growth throughout the story, and he's undergone a considerable mental transformation compared to when we first met him. Well, he's unlocked an astonishing new physical form this time, too…

From the first mention of his mutation piece, there was always a hint at something extraordinary, but still, he's just too overpowering…

I like to call this new state of his Dark Gasper, or Gasper Balor.

His ability to stop time has reached an absurd level, shrouding a whole town in overwhelming darkness and spawning mysterious creatures, and his physical abilities have gone through the roof. He's one formidable monster.

But what scares me most is Rias's knack for picking up the best team members. She's on par with her brother in that regard, well on the way to developing a Demon King–class Familia.

Next up, Ddraig and Albion.

Our Two Heavenly Dragons have reached an accord! They've both grown after being forced to shoulder their emotional burdens, and now they've come to realize just how important they are to each other.

It's been a long journey. At first, Ddraig regarded Issei's passion for breasts with amusement, only to gradually find himself being

overwhelmed by his host's breast power and sinking into a deep depression. But by sharing his hardships with Albion, he's starting to show signs of recovery. Their discussions with each other comprise the underlying theme behind this volume.

The fourth arc of the story will feature Ddraig's resurrection as a catalyst for Issei's further growth.

In a way, seeing Ddraig so inspired by Albion is one of the emotional highlights this time around, don't you think?

Now for a little on our heroines' power-ups.

I wrote about Asia's, Akeno's, and Xenovia's power-ups in Volume 14, so I decided to focus on Rias and Koneko this time around.

Rias's newfound destructive ability is a one-hit kill technique so powerful it even brought down the evil dragon Grendel. It isn't suited for Rating Games—this one will be reserved for real combat.

Koneko's new moves are her purification technique and temporary physical maturation. The former will prove especially effective against evil dragons.

All that's left are Rossweisse and Irina. Naturally, I also have plans for them.

Let's not forget our villains.

The ultimate boss this time around was none other than Vali's grandfather, Rizevim Livan Lucifer!

He is without a doubt the son of the original Lucifer. In fact, there's a moment in Volume 4 where Vali talks about his background, revealing that he's the former Lucifer's great-grandson. Obviously, this means he has both a father and a grandfather—and now the latter has emerged as the enemy mastermind. As you've seen, he's completely unhinged, so no doubt he'll continue to wreak havoc alongside Euclid and those evil dragons.

Euclid also made an appearance with a slavish copy of the Boosted Gear. I've been wanting to do a battle between the real Red Dragon Emperor and an impostor Red Dragon Emperor for a while now, so I took this opportunity to put it to paper.

Lilith, Ophis's alter ego made from her stolen powers, will be fleshed out more in future volumes.

As for the number 666, Trihexa, that refers to the beast appearing in the Book of Revelation alongside the Great Red. Note that the name and setting are original to the *DxD* universe in this case.

That brings us to the return of our handsome Holy Spear wielder.

Don't blame me for spoiling it if you skipped straight to the afterword, but he's back!

Cao Cao, master of the Holy Spear, has returned from the depths of hell.

He's made a comeback, all so he can see Issei again! Just kidding! But I do want to highlight how his resurrection will intertwine with the story moving forward. Keep your eyes open!

Seriously, though, that bastard is sneaking up on our protagonist again… We're up to Volume 16 now, and not only have our heroines all taken a liking to Issei, a growing number of male characters are starting to pursue him, too.

We've finally put together a team—DxD!

The enemy this time is more perilous than ever, prompting the formation of a special response team.

That being said, Issei and the Gremory will remain the main focus of the story. I plan to bring the members of Team DxD into the forefront with each successive volume to showcase their unique talents. I'm thinking of having Issei team up with Dulio, Sairaorg Bael, and others for some team fights. I'm afraid we can't just let everyone fight together just yet—with so many players in the mix, it would be too difficult to convey in writing. So the plan is to keep focusing on the Occult Research Club plus one or two other members at a time.

Think of it as an anti-terrorism team made up of those who have already interacted in the story. If we do see the full team come together, it would only happen around the climax to this fourth arc

of the narrative.

Lastly, some brief acknowledgments. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to Miyama-Zero and my editor H, as always!

In fact, by the time this volume is released, *High School DxD* will be celebrating its fifth anniversary. It's all because of you, the fans, that we've been able to keep on going for as long as we have. Thank you!

In the next volume, it will finally be time for a Rossweisse story! We'll delve into the involvement of mages and other mystical figures, and we'll also take our first look at the school Saji mentioned this time around, currently being set up by the Sitri and Bael Familias.

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