

Fate/Bonds Beyond Humanity

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75- Old Flames

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Jungles were places usually inhabited by several varieties of fauna and flora with the more exotic ones having several types of different creatures or plants just a few feet from each other from the tallest mammal to the smallest insect.

So long they didn't share a relationship between prey and predator but that wasn't going through a particular devil's mind as he flew past several trees and blew apart some leaves. He landed beside a huge fallen bark safely before taking several deep breaths and cleaning the sweat from his forehead before looking around.

What that man feared wasn't an animal or any creature from the jungle as the environment was isolated to avoid outside interference during the Rating Game. On the contrary, the jungle itself was supposed to favor ambushes and indirect assaults by hiding the participants.

It was supposed to be a method to equalize the battlefield as Zephyrdor had been warned several times his opponent was the more experienced fighter. Didn't matter if that was their first Rating Game, everyone he knew warned him of the other's devil prowess in combat. Since the possibility of being recognized as the true Heir of the Glasya-Labolos was at stake he took the warning very seriously.

'How things turned so wrong? So very, very wrong?!' Zephyrdor breathed a couple more times before running towards some bushes and jumping over a giant red flower while discarding his yellow and black coat. A quick spell turned his shirt into dark green as he kept running. 'We didn't even have a chance!'

The Rating Game had started normally for Zephyrdor and his peerage, at least from what he learned watching the professionals. Then things went wrong so fast there was nothing the pureblood devil could do to stop the onslaught of his peerage.

Sure none of them was dead but his opponent made sure to break their bodies and spirits thoroughly while keeping Zephyrdor far from the action with a Bishop and a Rook pushing him away from the battlefield until everyone else had been finished off.

They had started fighting close to an Aztec temple the devil knew nothing about but it was in honor from one of the VIPs watching the match. Without a doubt they appreciated the bloodbath even if no devils were killed because Glasya-Labolos Peerage were pretty much offered as a sacrifice.

And Zephyrdor couldn't understand why. 'Why was he so angry? If anything, of all Heirs he should be the one to understand my position more than anyone else!' He could feel himself

panic just as he did when the Bishop and Rook locked him down. 'All my peerage has been retired already, I should have already lost and yet...' Diving behind another tree he gulped hard and inspected his surroundings. 'He retired his own peerage... he retired his whole peerage...'

First the potential Heir had found himself surrounded by some of the most powerful devils of his generation, their King watching him with calm but terrifying eyes. Then, before Zephyrdor could say anything, be a threat or a surrender, the opposing team were dismissed by their King, leaving only those of noble birth in the temple.

"Now show me if you can back your words." The other man asked while staring at him with those dangerous eyes that made the older devil take a step back in fear. "Come on, show me your power. Make this interesting."

"What words?" Glasya-Labolas asked himself. "We never really spoke with each other." Zephyrdor wished he had asked when the chance but after that challenge he could see a chance of victory since it was just him and his opponent.

Such a view didn't last for long as after several attacks, despite suffering none, Zephyrdor was the one who found himself tired and almost beaten. He kept trying several tricks, holding that chance of victory as a solitary hope that he could still turn things around.

More and more the pureblood devil started to believe it was an illusion of some sort as everything he threw at his black haired counterpart was easily brushed off. Be either elemental or mana, his attacks were all nullified or ignored. After several attempts and a look of disappointment from his adversary the older devil saw no choice but to run.

Which he found quite pathetic of himself. 'Calm down, calm down Zephyrdor Glasya-Labolas! You are so close to being recognized as the true Heir! So close! You don't need to win, just put on a good show!' Looking around he still saw no sign of his opponent and moved to create a magic circle on a tree. The beginnings of a trap. 'I can't surrender without at least taking my pound of flesh! If I do then my chances are-'

A shiver ran through his spine and the devil abandoned his work to run in a random direction while looking around in panic. Deeper in the jungle he went until he found a clearing, raising his hands with magic circles. Slowly he found the center of the clearing where he began to look around even more frantically as the sensation of being watched grew stronger.

'He is here! Where?! Where?! There?!' Jumping around Zephyrdor unleashed a blast of cutting wind that destroyed much of the vegetation but hit no one. "Show yourself, Sairaorg Bae!!! Face me like a proper devil!"

All he heard was more wind and the dancing leaves of the jungle. There were no birds to sing and no critters to distract him so all movement could only come from his opponent and the wind. The latter was far too recognizable for him as that was his Element.

He also learned that day Sairaorg also had control over wind even if he shouldn't have to the best of his knowledge. 'How can a devil use an Element when they don't have magic?!'

Zephyrdor's mind tried to come up with an excuse for his situation but didn't dare to call Bael's Lion a cheater. Since the younger noble retired his own peerage when there was no need, everyone watching knew Sairaorg had to be fighting fairly. Worse, the black haired devil wanted things to be seen that way which wasn't a good sign

Again feeling that sensation in his spine the Glasya-Labolas jumped around and unleashed several blasts of mana and wind at his back. The feeling wasn't gone and if anything grew more intense, making the devil panic grow further. He didn't know what it was but sure enough the pureblood didn't like it.

Having lived a sheltered life Zephyrdor couldn't recognize the feeling of being stalked by a predator who was patiently waiting for his prey to exhaust himself before striking. That feeling of being watched, of eyes everywhere, was starting to get in his nerves.

From Sairaorg specially because even if the younger man hadn't said it there was an animosity between them and Zephyrdor couldn't understand why. The whole situation made no sense for the older devil but it certainly started to affect him. He was getting more jumpy and concerned as he looked for the Bael Heir everywhere.

"Show yourself, Sairaorg!! Didn't you say you wanted a fight?!! FIGHT ME!!!!!" His words spread through the whole jungle as he knew they would. However silence was his reply until he heard some leaves falling from his right and quickly unleashed his strongest attack in that direction. "Got you!!!"

The area exploded with light red energy but once it was gone Zephyrdor saw nothing but some fallen trees. He was starting to get angry with his opponent's cowardness despite the younger man's challenge and so he let out a roar of fury while pushing mana from his body.

Zephyrdor felt the wind bow to his command as veins pulsed in his forehead and an angry grin grew in his face. "You think you can mock me?! You think you can trick me?!!" A magic circle appeared over his mouth. "I will show you what I got! **Reveal yourself, Sairaorg Bael!!!**"

From his vocal cords magic was unleashed, the sort of spell that was exclusive to the Glasya-Labolas Clan and belonged to one of the new Maous. Power of Voice was their Clan's exclusive right, the sort of spell that allowed one's voice to reach anyone anywhere in an area determined by the person's power.

When paired with a command it became a strong compulsion magic capable of convincing cowards to gain courage and retreating armies to stand their ground. It wasn't hypnosis as much as the devil offering their followers and allies new strength by giving some of their own.

Yet it could also be used offensively by attacking an enemy's ears with subsonic frequencies that would cause misery to dogs and other animals with more advanced hearing. A skilled member of the Glasya-Legolas Clan didn't need to practice the Power of Voice offensively, specially not with their peerage around, but it was a valid alternative.

Especially to Zephyrdor who could use his wind magic to spread his voice farther and keep his effect up for longer. The speed of sound was already well defined and against someone who moved faster than it was impossible for the Power of Voice reach them. Except for devils like Zephyrdor and it was why he was the best candidate to be the next Heir as his Wind Element allowed his Power to go beyond its usual limits.

Thanks to magic he knew his attack had hit the size of a huge city before starting to lose potency so Zephyrdor was confident Sairaorg was hit. **“How did you like that?”** He asked using the Power of Voice so anyone in the pocket dimension could hear him. There was just him and his opponent but he guessed Sairaorg was somewhere far away. **“Regretting thinking you could take me out by yourself now? Huh? Huh?!”**

Glasya-Labolas potential Heir began to relax, confident his attack had caused some damage wherever his opponent could be. He was prevented from doing so because of the feeling of being watched which came back at full force. It was closer or it wasn't, Zephyrdor just couldn't tell and that made him even more nervous.

“Where are you?!” He didn't even bother to use the Power of Voice. “Show yourself!”

Starting to walk in a circle the man unleashed magic blasts in every direction, his magic circles spun with each attack making them faster as he concentrated his energy in different points of the circle.

It was like he was holding a gatling gun with each hand, also showing his skill with magic as Zephyrdor moved and destroyed everything around him. To the older devil it didn't even matter if he was hitting Sairaorg or not, he just kept firing indiscriminately. And since his reserves were considerable the attack lasted quite a few minutes.

When he was done Zephyrdor still stood in a clearing but it wasn't surrounded by a jungle and instead it was like he was dropped in a desert created by several explosives. No leaves or a single grass blade stood for at least two and a half kilometers with only a few dead trees remaining as proof there was life once.

Yet the sensation in his spine had not abated to the point his head was moving constantly, trying to find his enemy. **“Where are you?!”** The Power of Voice ran freely, not to attack but to just cover the whole pocket dimension. It almost sounded desperate but Zephyrdor managed to hold his composure. **“Show yourself already!”**

After turning his head a few more times the man felt like he was still in the jungle, surrounded everywhere by vegetation even after he made a small desert. At that point the animal part of his brain realized something evolution taught most mammals in his situation sooner or later; he was being hunted.

Shaking his head a few times Zephyrdor snapped back to reality to see the empty space surrounding him as he took deep breaths to calm himself. ‘This is still a Rating Game. It is just me and Sairaorg. I just need to find him-’

“You really should learn to look up.” The younger devil’s voice almost made him sound as the older one not only for his tone but the gravitas behind it. “Or are you so unused to fighting your own kind that the idea never crossed your mind.”

Slowly, slower than a turtle emerging from the sand, Zephyrdor turned his head back and up to see the floating Sairaorg just a few meters above his head. The Bael Heir’s huge bat wings opened themselves fully and covered the older devil in his shadow as even more sweat poured from Glasya-Labolas’ forehead.

Sairaorg frowned before scoffing. “That was surprisingly pathetic. Is this really the Glasya-Labolas Clan best choice for the future Lord?” Gently he landed on the floor, his arms still crossed as he studied the older devil who took a fearful step back. “And you dare to call yourself Heir of the 72 Pillars? I feel insulted and disgusted in equal measure.”

That was enough to burn away Zephyrdor’s fear and give birth to a new anger. “Shut up you reject! I don’t need to hear something from you who has no magic to speak of!” Opening his own wings he jumped back, Sairaorg just watching as he combined his magic circles. “I am going to show you who is pathetic!!”

Clear red mana surrounded the man with wisps of purple, green and white jumping around his body as Zephyrdor focused his considerable magic power in the magic circle. It pulsed with mana and the two last people in that dimension could hear a small buzz growing around the area.

Sairaorg didn’t do anything, calmly staying in the same spot as the power slowly built up. Seconds counted up as the younger man watched the other make faces while pushing his power in the magic circle. Because of his lackluster magical capability the Lion of Bael couldn’t tell if his opponent was being efficient or not but he recognized the effort behind it.

Even if he was sure, thanks to many in his peerage that could use magic, Zephyrdor was being wasteful regardless if the time he was taking was any indication. Time and the ugly faces he started to make as the magic circle grew more unstable before becoming stable again an instant later.

“Take this!!!” The Glasya-Labolas’ representative pushed his magic circle and unleashed a true tornado in Sairaorg’s direction.

They weren’t that far from each other but the attack still managed to pick up plenty of dust and fallen rocks before hitting the younger noble who didn’t react as the winds began to consume him.

“YEEEEESSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!” Raising his arms Zephyrdor pushed more power in his attack making his tornado grow bigger until it became a hurricane. “FEEL MY POWER!!!!!! FEEL THE POWER OF GLASYA-LABOLAS!!!!!!!!!! HAHAHAHAHAHAHHA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

For a good while the pureblood devil focused his power in keeping the hurricane going even as he had to fly back as more and more wind made it grow even bigger in size. Didn’t take

long for it to hit the jungle, mixing up trees and vegetation into its composition. It grew to the point Zephyrdor began to focus on just keeping it stable.

It was so big the older devil needed to do nothing but stay out of its way.

So Zephyrdor was unpleasantly surprised when his huge creation, the sort of hurricane which could destroy cities with ease, fell apart with the sound of a loud cannon that managed to shatter the hurricane's roars.

It was rather jarring watching it all unfold from the devil's perspective and little by little his smile fell apart, much like his wind, as he looked down in horror at what caused the fall of a spell which cost most if not all his power.

Standing there with an arm stretched in a punching pose was Sairaorg Bael who looked no worse for wear. Sure some of his clothes, of a quality which showed his status as a noble, were ruffled and torn but the man himself was unharmed. Indeed he even looked up with the same apathetic expression before shaking his head.

"Pathetic. You used this much power and don't even know something as simple as the 'eye of the hurricane'." The Lion of Bael commented while tearing apart his already damaged robes to reveal an extremely form fitting muscle shirt beneath revealing powerful muscles visible harder than stones. He kept looking up and shook his head again at seeing a lack of reaction. "The eye of the hurricane is something normal in tornados and hurricanes, the center where the wind is less 'dangerous'. If you had kept his attack as a tornado then the wind could have kept hitting me but once you turned it into a hurricane it was barely a bother."

Zephyrdor looked like he had swallowed a sour lemon as truly he had indeed known nothing about the 'eye of hurricane' concept. Once it was explained he quickly understood that at some point his attack was doing less the more power he put on it. And that realization broke something in his mind.

Like as if a dam had been ripped apart by his hurricane, all exhaustion and fear came to the forefront at once. The older devil found himself panting as his wings failed him, his body slowly descending to the ground as the last of his energy was used to try some sort of stable landing.

Regardless, he knew defeat wasn't the only outcome from his failed attack but also humiliation as the whole Underworld heard his blunder and watched him waste all his power in an attack that did something between little and nothing.

Still several meters above the ground, Zephyrdor looked absolutely devastated from his failure and unwilling to keep going. His slow descent wasn't just due to weakness but because he had little to no interest in composing himself and continuing the fight. Anyone with any experience in combat could tell the man was utterly beaten.

Cue to Sairaorg's backheel kick on Zephyrdor's left shoulder, a kick so hard that sent him flying down towards the ground and had him hitting a tree before eventually having nowhere left to move.

Zephyrdor knew not what surprised him more; Sairaorg's surprise attack or the fact he was still conscious. Conscious but in a whole new world of pain as his arm's bones were definitely broken. Glancing to his left he saw an useless limb and a shoulder that appeared ready to pop from his socket and out of his skin.

Sure that sort of damage was enough to make him scream in anguish while holding his shoulder with his good hand. Having no means to heal himself Zephyrdor could only go to his knees and try to fight to control himself even as tears began pouring from his eyes. Such a humiliating position shouldn't be shown in a Rating Game but that detail was far from his mind.

What was on his mind was horror when Sairaorg landed in front of him with a cold look just short of contempt. It went against everything the older man knew about Bael Heir who was called fair if a little battle hungry and respectful towards his opponents. Certainly not the man before Zephyrdor who looked ready to kill him in a friendly competition.

Worse was that Glasya-Labolas didn't know why his fellow noble was acting like that but obviously Sairaorg had entered the Rating Game fully intending on not only defeating him but to do so as brutally as possible.

Or at least doing so in the most humiliating manner possible so, understanding his position and to avoid further damage to his image, Zephyrdor opened his mouth, "I sur-" only to have it closed by Sairaorg's hand as it slammed his head on a half fallen tree.

Saying nothing the Heir of Bael held his opponent there with his cold eyes locked into Zephyrdor's. His grip was strong and both devils knew he could easily crush the older one's cranium with some effort and knock him out with less. Instead of pushing that far he only tightened his grip enough so to gradually inflict more and more pain.

Pain that had the older devil reaction, trying to kick Sairaorg away or force his arm to let go. Mana was scarce but fear and adrenaline powered Zephyrdor enough to create a magic circle. Smaller than his hand as it was, the magic circle was still useful so blasts of wind and mana flew straight to the Lion of Bael's face.

Only to have no effect. "How does it feel to be cornered?" Sairaorg asked as his opponent kept trying to escape. "Unpleasant, isn't it? Sure it is vastly different to be in this situation in combat instead of at a party but the crowd is larger even if we can't see them." Zephyrdor kept struggling as the grip around his mouth kept growing tighter. Up until a point as Sairaorg was sure the older devil couldn't take much more pain and stay awake. "I bet you want to know why I am doing this?" Wide eyes in fear and realization were the response. "Yes, this situation is by design. I am not really good at politicking but I know how to work a crowd and how to make them love me. My Honored Ancestor- sorry, Zekram Bael, says it is good enough to be a Lord after a few lessons."

His tone was flat and factual but Zephyrdor felt he was being talked down to instead of being talked to. It wasn't a nice feeling, especially not when he couldn't reply or that Sairaorg kept his hand around his mouth. A wrong move from the black haired devil's part and he would rip the older one's jaw off.

Except that Sairaorg wasn't like Zephyrdor, he had perfect control over his power and knew how to apply it perfectly to make sure his opponent's wouldn't break. It was a necessity during his arena fighter days so to pace himself against powerful opponents or safely spar with allies.

Regardless, the fact was that Sairaorg was more worried in interpreting his enemy's reactions than harming him unintentionally since he needed to keep Glasya-Labolas representative's mouth shut to avoid a surrender.

"You are wondering why I am doing all this." It was easy to see it written on Zephyrdor's face. "Did you really think you could attack us, Heirs, and expect no retaliation?" Surprise was next and Sairaorg could obviously understand why. "Not all of the 72 Pillars get along with each other, that is true. But I grew up in Gremory Territory after my family kicked me out. There I made two friends, one of which you insulted, tried to humiliate and dared to spit in her dream's face."

Understanding dawned on Zephyrdor as he finally could see what Sairaorg's cold anger was about. 'All this for that bitch Sitri?!

Sairaorg tightened his grip a little more, making his opponent scream in his hand. "You just thought something rude about Sona, didn't you?" Learning how to read someone's eyes was one of the things that made him a great fighter and was another skill he developed to survive. For example he could see the instant defiance gave way to new panic even before Zephyrdor renewed the attack on his arm. "She probably would love to deal with you herself, with a peerage like hers, Noble Phantasms or not, I bet they would rip you apart."

While Zephyrdor would disagree if Sona didn't have Noble Phantasms, their presence was enough that the man considered approaching with a proper apology for his insult just to not be destroyed much like Sairaorg was doing with him.

But much like the Bael Heir, the Sitri Heiress wouldn't give him any mercy and he only began to understand that as Sairaorg showed no remorse or hesitation in punishing him. On the contrary, Sona would make him a different sort of example and he had no idea who was worse.

"Yeah, she would love that. But Sona and Rias didn't get you first, I did." Sairaorg continued with a small smile. It was a dangerous smile that promised even more pain. "Also don't expect to just escape because of the judges. I insisted they make sure this match would keep going until one of us couldn't fight... As in full blow unconscious or, well, I can see you got the hint." A surprised look from his opponent had the Lion of Bael laughing. "Yes, yes. I bribed them but surprisingly there is nothing in the rules saying that we can't bribe them to give my opponent advantages like only retiring when they lose consciousness or surrender. The latter of which you won't do." Disbelief descended on Glasya-Labolas' eyes, both from

the confession and its contents. "Ah, don't worry, nobody can hear us. My Queen made sure to disrupt the spells that capture sound in the arena while we dealt with your peerage. They can still read your lips, however."

Which meant that to surrender he needed his lips visible, explaining why Sairaorg went to painful lengths to keep him from talking. The grip itself wasn't necessary as there were other preparations in place to keep the game going, it was just the Bael Lion expressing his anger while explaining his reasons. In the end Sairaorg was an honorable man and if he was going to beat someone he wanted to make clear why they were taking a beating in the first place.

His Queen called him a gentleman for that, the rest of peerage named him demon.

Especially when he wanted to teach people a lesson. "You know, if I didn't have someone that I loved and had to have an arranged marriage, Sona would have been my pick." He confessed much honestly, surprising the other devil. "That is neither here nor there, I don't love her that way. Still she is a dear friend, someone that I can hold a conversation without fear of being backstabbed after. You haven't been a Heir for long but let me tell you, it is worse than just being a noble and even worse for someone like me who had to climb the ladder by force."

The number of people who wanted and worked for Sairaorg's downfall wasn't small with several of his Clan being prime suspects of several conspiracies. Finding friends was hard enough for a noble who couldn't guess who was trying to take advantage of their position and true friends amongst those were rare.

Sure he only met Sona due to his association with Rias but Sairaorg was glad to meet both of them and really admired the petite Heiress, much like with his cousin, it was easy to appreciate her company, to trade ideas with someone as ambitious as him.

And she was ambitious but kind, a combination that Sairaorg was proud to associate with himself most of the time much to his Ancestor's chagrin. Most of the time, certainly not in that Rating Game and not against someone who insulted his friend. Like he said before the Bael Lion knew Sona wanted a piece from Zephyrdor as well but he got his turn first.

He wouldn't lose the chance to show his displeasure at the older man's actions. "You said we are alike but we are very different; you got a chance because your Clan judged you worthy. Me? The second I am seen as unworthy they are going to jump me like sharks." Sairaorg slacked his grip just to make sure he didn't retire his opponent too soon. "And yeah, Sona's dream is ridiculous, but so is a devil that can barely use magic and has no Power taking over a Pillar. Well, not the right power, at least."

Suddenly Zephyrdor understood why despite both struggling to one day lead their Clans they were not in the same position; he was awarded the possibility because of the legitimate Heir's death while Sairaorg worked hard to reach where he was.

Work Sona would also have to undertake in order to achieve her dream and he had belated that. He had not only insulted the Lion of Bael's friend but the man himself didn't care about

what others said about him. Didn't stop Sairarog from being disgusted, feeding the flames of anger against his fellow pureblood devil.

Truly he had been insulted but obviously the humiliation of the Heiress infuriated the young man the most. "I see you finally understood your position." With his captor's hand slack, Zephyrdor managed to nod his affirmation in panic. "Good," relief grew in the older devil's heart, "but not enough." Only to be plucked out by Sairaorg's words. "I don't like to pick on weaklings," and being called a weakling was a huge blow to any pureblood devil's ego, "but you are not the kind of guy who will just drop things after a stern talking."

No, he was the sort that to elevate his own position he would insult and belittle other people to make sure he was seen in a positive light by the top brass. It meant Zephyrdor could easily try some sort of revenge at a later date if the 'lesson' didn't stick. And Sairaorg would make it stuck in the most painful way possible.

In essence he was going to do the same thing Zephyrdor did to Sona; humiliate him publicly. Sure it was through a Rating Game and the older man had a better chance of fighting back but the Bael Heir called him a weakling for a reason. As things stood the chances of Glasya-Labolas leaving the Rating Game with his dignity intact were up to Sairaorg's mercy.

Since the older man insulted his friend Sairaorg wasn't feeling particularly merciful. "We are going to see what you are made of." Touki flared around his body and Zephyrdor grew terrified again. The Bael's Lion presence was so heavy the older man could only think of a Maou instead of someone younger. "Since we both are wind users, I am going to attack with just our Element. Surrender, fight back, run, your call. But I will only use wind."

With that the younger devil stepped back and the older one fell on his ass while taking deep breaths. Every rational part of his brain was telling him to really surrender and with good reason. His right arm needed medical attention, his reserves were low and the storm of emotions made him dizzy.

Yet there was pride, the pride of being a noble in the Underworld, the pride of being picked as the next Heir, the pride on his strength which his opponent was dismissive in the worst of ways which included a handicap.

Pride was called the Greatest of Sin and Lucifer himself had once claimed it as his Domain like a god would. Devils, no matter how gently, had plenty of that particular sin in their hearts with few capable of mastering it. Tame it to not get in the way.

And Zephyrdor wasn't an exception so pride turned his thoughts away from fear into fury.

'How dare he?!' Thought Glasya-Labolas representative with hatred in his heart. 'He thinks he is special? Just because he is officially the Heir? Because he took it by force? Fuck off!' Slowly and carefully he began to get up while hiding the buildup of his remaining mana. 'He thinks his wind is better than mine? I will show him! There is no way a devil with such pathetic reserves can compete with my magic!'

Everyone from his Clan praised his power and overall magical energy calling him the strongest of his generation. Sure he wasn't born with the power of the strongest member of his Clan Falbium, Glasya-Labolas the new Asmodeus, but everyone spoke of his potential to reach similar heights.

When told Asmodeus had other blessings through his body his parents told him it wasn't even a fair comparison since the man was born with a power outside the Pillars Powers, a mutation of a sort born throughout centuries of selective breeding.

But that was irrelevant to Zephyrdor who was picked as the next leader of Glasya-Labolas and the one who would see them into the future.

What was important was that his Clan acknowledged him and losing to Sairaorg meant losing that acknowledgement and the privileges it gave him. He wasn't Falbium but, believing in his potential, Zephyrdor dreamed of surpassing the Lazy Maou with or without extra powers.

'I still have Voice.' Internally the man grinned as he felt the mana growing thicker in his vocal cords. 'You are waiting for a magic circle, Sairaorg Bael? Then keep looking at my arm! Watch it carefully as the real attack will be faster than you can react!' When the attack was ready he made to stand up fully.

Then he stared at the Lion of Bael in the eye and opened his mouth, keeping it hidden with his head down so the younger man couldn't see the magic circle inside his throat. Zephyrdor kept watching the Heir of Bael with careful eyes, getting ready to say a word and rip his eardrums apart.

Only to feel a tremendous amount of pain in his midriff when Sairaorg moved his hand and unleashed a pebble made of compressed wind. "I apologize if I am wrong but those aren't the eyes of someone about to surrender." Commented the younger man as his Touki glowed with a golden aura around him. "And if I am right then you chose poorly."

"**Sai-**" The word barely left his mouth before the younger man flicked his wrist and he felt like a hammer had hit his chest.

Then Sairaorg changed his footing and began to throw several punches despite being meters away from his opponent. With every punch Zephyrdor could hear the sound of wind breaking the speed of sound but he failed to recognize it. To be fair it was hard to focus when a wave of pain began to cover his body.

Not a wave in truth but several fist sized attacks made of pure wind empowered by Ki which hit every single part of his body faster than he could react or process individually resulting in him feeling it everywhere all at once.

Something curious happened with so many attacks being unleashed at faster than Zephyrdor could react; he began to dance. Not purposefully as he couldn't even move due to Sairaorg's attacks or his lack of capability. Still he was conscious so as his bones broke and his muscles were torn apart he felt the damage of every move his body involuntarily made.

He couldn't scream or talk or even ask to surrender as like the younger devil promised no one would hear him. They didn't hear his screams either as it was all he could do while his body moved like a marionette with too many strings pulling in several directions.

Everything that was happening was the result of Sairaorg trying his hardest to not accidentally kill his opponent while giving him a chance to fight back. Had he had more mercy in his heart the Heir of Bael would have just ended things but fury clouded the judgment of even the best men.

Sairaorg himself wasn't aware of that as his Ki flowed easily around his limbs and he kept going into a practiced sequence of strikes like he did every day, interchanging his punches with small kicks and fake blocks against an invisible enemy because his real one wasn't going to fight back anymore.

Took a few more seconds for him to realize what he was doing and the man promptly stopped attacking to watch the mess he made. It was Zephyrdor's body while still whole couldn't be called intact. Back in the stadium the announcers commented how impressive it was that the older devil managed to stay standing with all the punishment he suffered.

Not noticing it wasn't voluntary, his broken legs were locked in a bad posture with his knees dislocated and pushed in such a way that coincidentally let out the illusion he was trying to remain standing.

Coincidence or not it would soon be noted as the face of absolute anguish in the man's face wasn't one from a determined fighter trying to keep going. It belonged to a desperate man that would be begging for mercy or the relief of death before ever thinking about challenging his enemy.

Only his head and face were intact as every single other millimeter of his flesh was covered with craters for they couldn't be called anything else. Dozens of dozens of small holes covered the once proud devil's body, his muscles broken as the color of his skin changed to pale and purple.

Yet they were also proof of Sairaorg's control as no hit had pierced flesh despite breaking almost every bone of his opponent's body, the Heir of Bael choosing to spare the head for the other devil's sake.

Focusing on his ears the Lion of Bael was able to hear the gurgle coming from Zephyrdor's throat as blood filled it. "Maybe I went too far if you are like that. Then again, you are still standing." More gurgles escaped and the black haired devil approached the older man with a calm step. "Or maybe not."

With a small gentle touch of his hand on the potential Heir's chest, Sairaorg watched as the man's body crumbled and began to fall without anything to support his weight. Their eyes kept locked into each other's, one watched with satisfaction as the other had fully sunk in despair.

Beaten to an inch of death, broken both physically and mentally, it was arguable in that moment he was truly dead even if his heart was beating.

However his mind was completely lost to the world as only darkness kept him company.

Darkness that trapped him in the memory of Sairaorg, the Lion of Bael, showed him truly overwhelming power which he knew wasn't even the tip of the iceberg, showing the older devil how insignificant he was.

Zephyrdor Glasya-Labolos has been retired. Victory goes to Sairaorg Bael.

It was a hellscape he wasn't strong enough to leave on his own.

A nightmare for when he woke up.

.....

The sound of a turning page barely could be heard amongst the conversation on that bright day as the summer heat was just in the right temperature to be comfortable as they all ate their lunches animatedly.

"Can someone pass me the ketchup?"

"Gasper-kun! How could you?!"

"Are you trying to corrupt my Master's cooking?"

"Nyahahahaha! Rias, I am disappointed with your subordinate."

"I just want some ketchup." The former dhampir looked ready to cry and couldn't help but whine to his King. "Buchou..."

Rias knew their friends were just teasing a little since Gasper was an easy target but knew exactly who could settle the matter. "Shiro..."

"Lay off him, the three of you." Turning the huge tome on his lap he spared Akeno, Xenovia and Yoruichi a glance before going back to studying. "It is a sandwich. If Gasper wants to have some ketchup he has the right..." He leaned to his right as Rias held one of his well made sandwiches for him to bite while he studied. 'It could use more tomatoes...'

"Lucky bastard."

"Your jealousy is showing, Ise."

"How aren't you jealous of that?"

"Because I have a girlfriend..."

“Then go eat with her!”

Koneko was tempted to hit the Pawn but instead turned to Liz and asked, “Can you pass me another?”

“Sure.” The maid opened one of several bentos prepared that morning, all of them full of sandwiches of various kinds. “These ones have eggs, fish or beef.”

“Beef.” It was the only one the little Rook hadn’t eaten yet.

Watching events develop around her, Irina swallowed the most delicious sandwich she ever had in her life before speaking. “Shirou-san...”

“Yes?” The Mage replied upon noticing she was waiting for a reply.

“I thought you were capable of incorporating any book’s knowledge in your... Reality Marble.” She whispered the name which made some people around chuckle.

“You don’t need to worry about being discreet around here, Irina-chan. The boundary field should keep any spies away.” Rias informed her of the recent change.

Azazel’s most recent precaution. “Considering how many important conversations happened on this rooftop, it is prudent.” The Cadre commented after finishing one sandwich and going for another, using one finger to point at the tall woman sitting besides Shirou with an arm around his neck. “Especially since we have one of Kyoto’s Kings present.”

“Hey, I am on my day off and nobody knows I am here.” Yoruichi reminded the man while biting her tuna sandwich.

Smiling at his yokai lover, Shirou scratched her neck exactly in the place she liked making her purr. “Yeah, relax a little. Everything is fine.” Sounded whimsical coming from him but everyone knew the redhead was dealing with some stuff the last few days. His focus turned to the still curious Irina before replying, “And you are right; for school work and other stuff it is easy to put a book’s contents in my swords and never forget them. Unfortunately this one is special.”

“It should be since it came from our family’s library.” Rin bragged freely.

Which Luvia wasn’t going to allow. “Poor, poor, Tohsaka. So proud that her family has something simple as a book with an anti-scrying spell in it. Tut tut tut.”

“Shove it, Edelfelt! That is one of the rarest books about Jewel Magecraft ever written and the best one to help with the fundamentals.”

“Shero doesn’t need fundamentals, he needs more practice and advanced material.”

“There is plenty of advanced material there! That book is one of my family’s treasures, you cow.”

“Wanna say that to my face, gorilla?!” Sparks began to fly from their eyes as they got ready to fight and everyone did their best to ignore the Red and Blue Ogres of Fuyuki.

“I am so glad they are such good friends.” Sakura, who hadn’t joined them for lunch in a while, said with a gentle smile. “More tea, Asia-chan?”

“Yes, thank you, Sakura-chan.” While she wouldn’t say it outloud the former nun truly found that Sakura’s tea was her favorite drink.

“Pft, calling them friends is really generous.” Xenovia firmly added which had several people nodding their heads.

“At least they are bitter rivals for certain.” Setsuna was sure they preened at her comment which made her sigh. “Now if you two could be a bit less destructive during gym...”

“A miracle.” One that Liz would gladly pray to but knew wasn’t likely to happen.

Heads turned to Medusa who shook her head. “Even at my full power I couldn’t enforce peace between those two more than I could the rest of the world.” After a pause she added, “The world would be easier.”

“Oh, hush. I agree with Sakura. Let them have their fun like the great friends they are.”

““Buchou, we aren’t friends.””

Shirou and several chuckled but he focused on explaining what the problem was to Irina. “As Luvia said this book in particular,” he closed the tome and Yoruichi took her arm off his shoulder as he raised it to show everyone, “has several runes and spells to stop it from being detected or read from a distance. See those lines?” Asked the Mage while pointing to the corners of the cover. “They form a pattern that interrupts spells like Structural Analysis from working on this thing so the only way to learn from it is reading it.” Considering it had little less than a thousand pages it took considerable time. “Most of the stuff is also complicated but it already helped a lot.”

“Like with my Gift~” Akeno caressed the jewel on her throat. The huge amethyst was in a choker much like Xenovia had Durandal and was slightly different from its original form.

To fit it into the Noble Gear Shirou had to learn how to cut it with both magic and a chisel he made especially for it. Medusa had to bless the small tool as Rin, Luvia and several books worth of reference spoke how a god’s power could help the process, acting like a catalysis of a sort.

Doubly so since it was Medusa’s Gift, made by the goddess to her priestess, holding powers even before it was turned into a Noble Gear. Powers that Akeno was still figuring out but the elevation of her Artifact into a Noble Gear gave it new tricks, much to the goddess’ interest.

She, more than everyone save for perhaps Rin, was interested in Shirou's progress with jewels. "If that book was the reason you managed to complete my Gift to my High Priestess I certainly will give Rin full credit for lending it to you."

"It did. Honestly I was worried for a while that I wouldn't be able to do anything unless I was working with a sword but..." Flipping through the pages the Mage smiled kindly. "It is a very good book so even a third rate magus like me can get decent at using Jewel Magecraft. Thanks, Rin."

Akeno nodded in agreement and approval. "Yes, thank you, Rin. Without your help Shirou-kun wouldn't have been able to complete the Serpent Eye any time soon." As the Noble Gear was for her the Hybrid tried to help several times with research and even magic. She even helped cut the jewel in its present shape which was similar to a ten sided die. "Truly I can't thank you enough."

"No problem, Emiya will be helping me with something far more powerful than the Blessing of a goddess once he understands Jewel Magecraft a little more." Rin reminded everyone with a thumbs up, making some of the group stare at her with concern and curiosity.

Only Luvia knew exactly what she wanted but Sakura suspected what that was. "Nee-san, are you sure? I don't think father would like you sharing that with Senpai."

"Then father can wrestle the family's control back between his own research and learning golf with Lord Gremory." Apparently the two fathers met each other due to some business contacts last time the devil was in town and had somewhat hit off. "Besides, Emiya still needs to brush off his knowledge a bit before going to the next phase."

Said redhead let out a sigh while half focused on eating and fully focused on his studies. "Maybe things would go faster if you tell me what you are planning. All you said is that we are making a sword worth out of jewels." Azazel did a spit take, getting everyone's attention. "You know what she was talking about?"

"Maybe? Wait, is your family the one he gave some blueprints to?" Because if so the Cadre grew immensely curious if they could pull it off.

Yet Rin was keeping her cards close to her chest for the moment. "Once Emiya shows himself capable of at least making something worthwhile with a gem without a goddess' assistance I will share." Her aqua eyes focused on the redhead who could feel them despite his focus on the book. "Unless you don't want to help?"

"Of course I will help." Everyone already offered any assistance she could need in her revenge and the Mage of Swords was no exception. "It is just that when it comes to Jewel Magecraft..."

"He sucks at it." Yoruichi observed with a grin. "But if it is to make some sort of sword, maybe he can pull off a miracle. Is that what you are counting on?"

"Not a miracle but close."

Sakura found her sister's cold expression concerning. "Nee-san, I thought you would want to elevate our magecraft by yourself."

Nobody was going to say that it wasn't about Magecraft or the Root or tradition for Rin Tohsaka but vengeance. They all quickly avoided looking at Sakura as Rin had made it more than clear that neither her sister nor her parents should know about her plans or her ordeal. Fortunately the younger Tohsaka was too focused on her sister to notice everyone else.

Which was how Rin could easily deflect with, "'Teamwork makes the dream work' and all that. I know nobody better to make a sword than the Mage of Swords." She pointed to something beyond the rooftop's fence, the lone sword still in the grounds. "If he can reforge Caliburn then everything else will be a piece of cake."

"I wish. Then I would have my own naginata again." Setsuna, understanding the plight of not wishing to concern a sibling, interceded.

At that point anyone wanted to say something to keep the dangerous topic at bay but most didn't have a clue of what to say. But since anything would do Kiba was the first to throw his metaphorical hat in.

"So, Rin-san, are you going to learn how to use a sword?" Related to the previous topic but still of interest to the devil it was also the kind of question Sakura wanted to ask herself.

"Maybe. In that case it will be Emiya's turn to pay back for his lessons by teaching me something for a change."

"Shouldn't you already have started practicing then?" Xenovia pointed out while grabbing another sandwich. "I know we make it look easy but it takes years to get good with a sword."

"If you suck at it then it will be a few days before you stop hurting yourself." Irina pointed out which had Asia turned to hear with a question.

"Did you cut yourselves?" Clearly the Bishop was scared.

"Not like that." The representative of the Church waved her concern away. "It is about knowing how to grip your sword right to not hurt your hands and keep the grip tight enough to never let it go but slack enough in the right times to change postures."

"The position of the thumb is also paramount." Xenovia threw it out without much care. "Holding a sword is an art of itself."

Kiba nodded in agreement. "Also knowing how to change postures to not cut yourself while not giving openings to your opponent." Pointed out the Knight with a smile.

"Different swords also demand different styles." Shirou said next. "Size, shape, all matters when it comes to weapons."

“There is a joke in there somewhere~” Akeno sang with a giggle.

Setsuna shook her head. “And just you are thinking about it. Shirou is right, different swords demand different training. We can help if we know what we are working with...”

Which made Rin rub her chin in agreement. “Maybe you guys are right. Perhaps I should start practicing swordsmanship sooner rather than later.

Yoruichi embraced her lover with both arms and a pout. “Today you won’t. We are going to have a date and I don’t get enough of those.”

“Still asking myself how a King of Kyoto can drop everything to spend some time with her boyfriend.” Azazel commented half as a joke, half as a challenge.

A challenge the yokai accepted. “Shouldn’t we ask the same thing about you, Governor General of the Grigori?”

Hearing his title the man couldn’t help but chuckle. “That is because I got people to do the boring stuff for me.”

“I got people too... Not enough to do all the boring stuff.” Yoruichi revealed with a pout that had Shirou scratching her neck.

“I can’t wait to have people for the boring stuff.” Medusa revealed with an excited grin.

“Do you even have boring stuff to worry about?” Her Champion asked, his hand still treating his second lover affectionately.

“Oh but we do.” Akeno couldn’t help but comment as she got some of her goddess workload. “Since her temple is still being built we are the ones who need to supervise and allocate every resource because a pair of Heiresses were feeling stingy.” For comedic value Rias began to whistle conspicuously. “There are also projects to attract followers, plans to build shrines...”

“I am also in charge of monitoring all of Fuyuki right now.” And the goddess truly meant ‘right now’ as some of her children were sending reports at every moment. As a Divine being Medusa was capable of keeping up with it and she had to because most of her snakes were still learning what was relevant to report or not. “Rather tiring, mind you, but it will get better eventually.”

“Want to back out?” Rias asked with a grin that had the goddess pouting.

Before her eyes danced with mirth as she asked, “How are the plans for my statue going? Collected enough gold?” That made the Heiress of Gremory bite her tongue mostly because the deal was too beneficial for devils for them to back out.

Already Medusa's contributions in monitoring Fuyuki were paying dividends as some illegal activities that went unnoticed before were brought to light and several Stray Devils were hunted before ever becoming a problem.

Only things from the moonlit world though as the goddess did her best to respect people's privacy under the policy she wouldn't like to be watched all the time either. She also let mundane issues be solved by mundane workers like the police. Yet the goddess was ready to only sound the alarm if anything truly concerning was happening.

Some of her snakes may have bitten a couple of criminals' ankles at the most convenient times but most of Medusa's focus was always in the moonlit world as Fuyuki's ley line was too juicy of a target for several entities who were better out or dead.

And she always warned the Heiresses first instead of the Watchers, both by their request and because it was more convenient. She did live with Rias and if it was Sona's turn the former can easily call the latter. So far she found no reason to call their guards for anything and Akeno already voiced their complaints.

Which were just some of the Queen's obligations. "Besides my duties as High Priestess, which I can only see increasing in the future..." She saw Medusa offered her a playful smile and shivered as the idol side of things was still untouched as the goddess was always happy to remind her. "I also need to help Rias with contracts. With training, singing practice and dancing lessons I too am finding little time for dates."

"Lucky bastard." Ise mumbled while glaring at the Mage who everyone knew was also dating the Hybrid.

Who found it too amusing. "You just need to work on yourself, Ise-kun."

"If you want, I can borrow some of my girls to help you two." Goddess and priestess turned to Azazel who smiled. "Not only I will be helping my favorite niece," the words got him a playful roll of eyes, "but some of them are willing to become priestesses for Medusa. Depending on some conditions, mind you."

"High Priestess, brochures." Commanded the goddess with a hand raised and with a magic circle several stacks of paper appeared so Medusa could shove them in Azazel's direction. "There they will find everything and anything they need to know about terms of service, conditions to join the faith, priorities to priesthood and other details. We still don't know how it will work for fallen angels," both purple and raven haired women speculated their wings would change color as they did for the Hybrid but not much else, "but I am willing to welcome anyone interested."

Fixing the stuff in his arms Azazel began to read one of the brochures before shrugging. "Sure thing." Either way, mission accomplished for him.

The Cadre's reasons for help weren't entirely altruistic, it was true that he wanted to help Akeno and also true a few younger fallen angels were interested in joining a god's services, Medusa was just the one they had the best standing with which gave them an opportunity.

But just like the two women were the only ones interested in the consequences of a fallen angel following a new god and Azazel did see that as an opportunity for his people. He had several of his agents keep their doors and ears opened for anyone interested. Also he wanted to make sure they would remain members of the Grigori that still reported to him.

Just in case their loyalty for Medusa overwhelmed the one to his person the Governor General would make sure those 'reports' were just 'casual' conversations between subordinates and a curious employer or colleagues.

The possibility of Medusa becoming the Goddess of Heaven was still on the table after all. "Do I send them to the temple or..."

"Like previously stated it isn't done yet so have one of them call us and we will schedule a meeting if they are still interested." At that the goddess shoulders dropped. "I know I still am not a great or complete goddess but assure them that I will do my best and right by them. They will stay as free as a fallen angels and-"

"Stay calm, my goddess." Akeno said while placing a hand on her shoulder. "They will understand and if they don't, then they will miss the opportunity to follow someone who cares for them... That isn't my dear uncle." Azazel's smile grew bigger as he was beaming with pride. "So don't worry. Everything can become great, given time and effort."

"Right, right. Thank you, my High Priestess." Looking around and seeing several endearing looks, Medusa cleared her throat. "Now, can someone pass me another sandwich before a certain cat eats everything." One eye was locked on Koneko who had a treat in each hand.

Meanwhile the three talked about the girls interested in following Medusa, Gasper leaned closer to his fellow Bishop's ear and asked, "Asia-chan, you didn't get anymore... presents, did you?"

Respecting Asia's shyness, nobody who heard the question turned to look at her even when she replied, "Yes, every day." That morning she found another box on her table with bracelets made of emeralds. "Diodora-san doesn't need to thank me for anything and I don't know what to do with those things."

"You could ask him to stop. Or ask Buchou to ask him to stop." Her fellow Bishop suggested but saw how the former nun didn't want to bother their King.

By her side Ise couldn't help but grind his teeth before taking a bite of his food. 'Good looking bastard's bothering Asia... but he's only giving her gifts.' Shaking his head he spoke aloud. "Say, Akeno-san, weren't you going to invite Caren-san to eat with us?"

"Oh my~ waiting to try and get along with the new nurse?"

A chuckle escaped Kiba's lips. "Didn't she traumatize your friends just the other day?"

“To be fair she traumatized a lot of students who didn’t know any better.” Akeno definitively considered becoming a nurse if she wasn’t going to be a High Priestess but her friend’s stories amused her nonetheless. “But she appreciated the invite and definitively the extra sandwiches I left behind.”

Both Liz and Koneko threw looks of betrayal at the Queen who giggled as Setsuna said, “Honestly those boys should have already learned to not mess with Hortensia-san. Or are they all developing masochistic tendencies?”

“Some definitively are.” Luvia, who had the pleasure of working with the nun turned nurse in a job, commented. “Sometimes she gets the same student visiting twice or three times saying they feel tired. Jokes on them because Caren is letting them ‘rest’ mostly so they struggle when exams are in the corner.”

“Huh, I forgot about those.” Ise confessed after blinking a few times.

Relaxing on her back, Irina giggled. “Kinda irrelevant when we already work defending the city.”

“Or when you already know all of the material and need to work on managing the town.” Rias pointed out.

Only for Shirou to remind her that, “Isn’t one of the conditions for you to stay here that your grades need to be good?” His lover winced at the reminder and he smiled before turning to Xenovia. “And you aren’t escaping either. I remember your last grade in math.”

“But Master-”

“No buts.” Her groan was music to his ears as the Mage knew she was going to study.

‘Grades don’t really matter to us, huh?’ Ise pondered as while he knew his parents cared and he didn’t want to disappoint them, he wondered what his schooling was for. ‘Not like I’m planning to go to college.’

[Ask your King what you can do after you graduate.] Ddraig suggested with a grunt as while he enjoyed the taste of Ise’s food, he also missed eating. [Push comes to shove you are probably working for the Gremory as a whole. Most likely as an enforcer of some sort.]

‘That sounds... right, I guess? You sound like you know a lot about it.’

[Not every single one of my Hosts was a king or a leader, plenty worked for someone else or another. Sometimes even changing employers mid job.] Feeling his Partner’s confusion at that observation he added, [I may have been part of one or two betrayals or coups.]

Coughing as his sandwich got stuck in his throat, Ise was saved by Irina slapping his back. “You okay?” He gave her a thumbs up but Sakura had already refilled his cup.

“Here, it is going to help.”

“Thank you, Sakura-chan.... You’re a saint.” He drank everything in a single gulp.

Seeing the interaction between the Tohsaka and Ise had Asia looking down to the cup she was about to offer before shaking her head which was observed by Rias who barely withheld a sign.

Conversation kept going until the bell finally rang and everybody began returning to their classrooms with the obvious exception of Medusa and Yoruichi who jumped towards the ORC planning to talk about the former ascension to Japanese goddess and its implications for the Yokai Faction.

Except the King of Gremory who held the former Holy Maiden back. “Akeno, go ahead please. I need Asia’s help with something.” She said just as the blonde was about to go down through the door and while some stopped to look, everyone decided to respect their privacy.

Including the Queen who understood what that was about. “Don’t take too long or the teachers will be mad~”

“Bah, like any of them could be mad with Asia-chan.” And Rias herself didn’t care as her Bishop was priority. The Queen giggled and the door of the rooftop closed down before she turned to the former nun, took a step back and took a deep breath. “He is still harassing you?”

Quickly the blonde girl shook her head with a little panic. “I mean, I wouldn’t call it ‘harassing’. He is just leaving me gifts.”

“Gifts, a couple of notes but not a single word to your person.” In different circumstances those actions could be romantic but Rias wasn’t liking how Diodora seemed to be avoiding her and by proxy Asia herself. “I tried to invite him to Fuyuki for a chat-”

“But Buchou-” A finger stopped her lips delicately.

“I understand that you don’t see anything wrong with what he is doing but even a secret admirer needs to face his crush sooner or later. And he is asking to marry you by notes.” While she would admit not being ready to let Asia go, Rias didn’t like how Diodora was treating the whole thing like a game or as if the answer would be ‘yes’ without ever talking with the former nun. “I get it that you saved his life, I really get it. But Asia, devils... we aren’t like humans. And a noble’s marriage is way, way too big to happen just like that. Doubly so between two houses.” They knew she was speaking the truth considering she had to fight to get out of her own. And that was with Riser, a man she didn’t love. “Sure, if he really cares for you, I will support you two but... he isn’t acting like it.”

Diodora, at least in Rias’ mind, should have dropped by Kuoh already to either talk with Asia or Rias herself. Instead the man was sending gifts, messages and trying to bribe Gremory’s people to get an advantage in whatever game he was playing. That wasn’t the sort of

behavior the Heiress of Gremory trusted even if it could be just a guy not knowing how to act.

For the moment there weren't any accusations as the redhead didn't know enough about Diodora to do such a thing without starting a fight with the Astaroth Clan but his abstinence was suspicious at the very least.

'Then again, he could be shy.' Rias thought as she saw Asia blush and how the blonde made every effort short of running to avoid her eyes. 'She is flattered by the gifts even if her attention is on another person.' Ise apparently couldn't see it, which the Gremory found really sad. "Look, I promised you I wouldn't call him without permission and I intend to keep my word but I can't help but worry."

After hearing that the Bishop nodded her head. "I know that and it's just... I don't know what to say to him yet."

"Do you want to marry him?" Rias asked as bluntly as she could. Hesitation poured from Asia in waves. "Forget about being the next Lady Astaroth, forget about politics, complications and just think about that question." All she saw was the former nun growing more nervous and that could mean several different things. Including just a young girl who wasn't ready for that kind of step. "Doesn't matter if the answer is yes or no, you have your own voice and if you want to stay with him I will do my best to support you even if you aren't part of the Gremory anymore." Seeing her horror Rias added, "And if you don't want to be with him, don't be afraid to just say it. There is nothing written anywhere that you can't just seek him out to tell him how you feel. Maybe he will be hurt from your rejection but it will be much worse if both of you end in an unhappy marriage." Gently she hugged Asia who relaxed in her embrace. "I am with you. No matter what you decide, we will always be family."

Taking a step back Rias saw how much more calm the blonde was compared to just a second before during the talk. Her eyes still held plenty of her shyness and gentleness but the redhead could also see a new resolve in them.

It still took a few minutes for Asia to speak again as she played with her hands while debating her request until finally, "Buchou, can I ask a favor?"

"Whatever you want and if it is in my means to give." The Gremory Heiress spoke formally with her head held high, preparing herself to either do well by Asia or to let her go.

Relief poured in her veins, hidden behind a confident poker face, when the Bishop asked, "Can you help me donate some of Diodora-san's gifts? I don't know if giving them back is going to be accepted but maybe we can do some good with them." After all, every single one of his gifts had been rather expensive. A surprised Rias nodded slowly as Asia continued, her fists raised with fierce determination. "Unless he wants them returned. Maybe I should ask first. Yes, I will ask."

"Asia, do you want me to talk to him?" The pureblood devil found herself surprised for the second time in ten seconds when the petite girl shook her head with intensity before

replying.

“No, I should be the one to talk to him.” Asia declared with determination that, while making her look cute like a puppy, showed a fierce soul. “If I... whenever he shows up, it is only right that I talk to him. We need to talk.”

Proud of her friend, the pureblood devil enveloped her in another hug and kissed her forehead before asking, “Can I be there for support?” She didn’t want to make it sound like she didn’t trust Asia but the redhead worried about the sort of reaction Diodora could have.

Even if everything he was doing was in good faith, the man was a fellow pureblood devil and the sort of person who wasn’t used to not getting what he wanted. If he truly was in love with Asia then Rias couldn’t feel comfortable leaving the two alone when her fellow noble could make a mistake they both would regret.

If his love was true then he would regret hurting Asia and if he did so then Rias would kill him, unleashing a storm of problems back in the Underworld. ‘Better call Akeno to hold me back, just in case... And Shiro to hold both of us back, just in case...’

A little bit of the Bishop’s timid nature shone through when she blushed and replied softly, “I would really appreciate that.” For all her inner strength Asia would always feel more comfortable with her loved ones around.

Truly proud of the girl in her arms, Rias gave her an even tighter hug before saying, “Then we will be there whenever that coward decides to show his face.”

“Don’t call him that, Buchou. That is probably his way of being romantic.” Gentle Asia didn’t hesitate to at least defend Diodora, making Rias snicker.

“Fine, fine. I won’t call him that... on his face.” Nothing could stop the King from teasing her friend a little, especially when she pouted. ‘Akeno really was a bad influence on me.’

Still that conversation ended with both satisfied and Rias felt like she was on a high that wouldn’t be brought down by annoying teachers nor noisy classmates. Especially those who wanted to know more about her life. Being popular could be extremely irritating and her good humor caught enough attention to get people curious.

The girls in her class more than most but she would only tell Akeno about the development and it would be in private. It was clear that everytime she approached her best friend everyone else, even some teachers, raised their ears in hopes to hear anything.

However if there was someone Rias wished would approach her or even ask about recent events with any sort of curiosity would be Sona. She would even take Tsubaki representing her King’s interests but at that point the Sitri Heiress wasn’t willing to give Rias the time of the day,

Just reminding herself about her oldest friend's cold shoulder almost dampened Rias' mood but after several days and the earful the redhead got the day after the fight for Caliburn she already expected it to go on for at least a while longer.

The Crimson-Haired Ruin Princess knew exactly what was going on; Sona was positively pissed about Caliburn still remaining in their territory.

If anything the black haired maiden didn't even care about the repairs on Kuoh's property or how much work they both put in to make sure everything was fixed before the next day of classes.

No, what truly infuriated the Smartest Devil of Her Generation, as the news of the Underworld started to call her for both brilliant strategies and finding someone capable of summoning Noble Phantasms, was that Calibur was still in Fuyuki with odds that Shirou would stop anyone from taking it again.

Rias hadn't even bothered to fight on that argument, letting her friend vent all her anger before just stating that, "*Asking Shiro to not help someone to keep smiling would kill him and I would die first,*" which earned her another round of complaints about how illogical that was.

All her arguments mattered little, both knew it. So long Rias' most precious person wanted something she would deliver it to him. In that case what he wanted was to preserve the happiness of others by protecting everyone from impossible expectations. Something the Heiress of Gremory was fully on board both due to experience and also because it sounded like the right thing to do.

"Then the sword will break by itself if its lofty ideals are that impossible. Better that it doesn't happen here!" Staring at the back of her friend's head, Rias remembered her fellow Heiress' last argument before she just shrugged.

"If they can draw the sword great, nothing we can do." Except Shirou would challenge anyone who had a legitimate shot of succeeding and maybe break their confidence the same way he did Altria.

Sona had departed the ORC's building after that, fuming, angry and knowing that the Mage of Swords was in her way. The man himself approached his lover and apologized for the situation but Rias waved it off asking only for a massage which he would have given for free anyway.

Facts were that she agreed with him in letting something like Caliburn around was better than offering someone as a sacrifice.

But those conversations were far in the back of her mind as Rias Gremory could care less about Holy Swords or maneuvering around the Underworld's nobility. Asia had taken another step towards adulthood and she couldn't be prouder. In fact her chest was busting with so much joy she almost raced to Shirou's class to celebrate the 'adult way'.

'Wonder if we can get away using the infirmary? Is Caren-san going to be mad? Fufufu.' Rias was humming in happiness as possibilities ran around her mind and she played with a pen instead of paying attention to the teacher. 'Or maybe we are finally going to do it in a classroom- No, he always gets so frustrated when I suggest it. At least outside of weekends~'

Those who saw her beautiful expression of love couldn't know her thoughts and were lost on how much more endearing than normal she looked. It was the picture of a noble lady in love and one fitting for a painting which some would praise for being the image of purity that spoke of a maiden waiting for her beloved.

Leaving her thoughts about her private celebration aside, she began to think about another member of her peerage. 'Now I just need to settle the issue with Ise's confidence.' Unfortunately things weren't going exactly smoothly in that front as her Pawn didn't care nor saw the problem. 'Doesn't help that Ddraig has his own ideas. I can teach that overgrown lizard a lesson later, for now I need to make plans to deal with Diodora. First things first... I need to know why he isn't answering my calls.'

Such an endeavor would involve informants on the Astaroth Clan which she had none. The idea of employing his methods and bribing someone to speak crossed her mind but was quickly dismissed. While a distasteful notion Rias didn't see herself above using it but still thought it was bad form since there were other options.

Simple ones like contacting his family and asking exactly what Diodora was up to in a discreet manner or approaching their mutual acquaintances, other nobles, to take measure of the man indirectly while preparing for a confrontation.

As things stood Rias knew she wasn't really a friend of Diodora nor knew anyone from his Clan enough to call them such. 'If I remember right the Astaroth Clan is a semi traditional bunch that doesn't mind Reincarnated devils. In fact their Territory is the best one to test Low Class to see if they are ready for the Middle Class...'

Off throughout the day Rias started making plans instead of paying attention to anything else until Akeno's hand settled on her shoulder making the pureblood devil blink in surprise before asking, "Class is already over?"

"Well, your head did look like it was in the clouds." The Queen pointed out with her usual smile. "Any particular reason?"

That question made Rias jump in excitement and she quickly organized her stuff to put it into a bag while saying, "Asia is going to..." Reminding herself where they were, the Heiress of Gremory giggled and shook her head. "Maybe we should talk in the club." Both could hear one of the girls groan which made them both giggle.

With that in mind the redhead managed to hold the news back even if just barely. If Asia wasn't shy she would be celebrating loudly or at least get all their friends for a small party. However the whole situation was of the private sort and the Bishop wouldn't want everyone else, especially Ise, involved.

'Besides, it is her fight.' Rias thought while she walked out with Akeno, meeting every member of the ORC on the way.

Conversation flowed smoothly and a few noticed Asia seemed to be more animated, chatting with Irina, the newest member of their club. Xenovia was by them, trying to tease her ex-partner about joining a club full of devils, but the trio just shared a good natured laugh.

"The Church Trio is going strong today." Ise observed with fascination which made Rias and Azazel share a chuckle.

"Well, they are a Bishop and Knights." Joked the Gremory King.

"I would call them Holy Maidens but one of them isn't a maiden anymore." The Cadre couldn't help himself, his elbow rubbing on Shirou's shoulder who did his best to ignore the older man.

What bothered the redhead magus a little were the eyes both Setsuna and Ise were throwing his way, one of frustration and other of rage. 'Can't you two give me a break?!' He withheld a sigh.

Soon their considerable big group arrived in Kuoh's forest area and they all felt the boundary field shift around them. "Huh? Isn't this the signal for visits?" Asked Kiba, trying to remember the last time someone had used it.

"Pretty much." Akeno said in agreement while tilting her head and looking at Rias. "Are we expecting someone?"

"Not that I recall. Most people wouldn't even know how to attune the barriers around the club." None lost their stride at the observation and the pureblood devil asked her Queen. "Is our resident goddess the one telling us about the surprise visit?"

Upon hearing her King's question Akeno closed her eyes and focused a little harder. "It wasn't Medusa-sama. Can Yoruichi..."

"No, she doesn't have 'administrator privileges'." Shirou reminded them.

"Enemy?" Anyone could tell that Liz was just asking the odds as the teacher didn't lose her bored expression.

"What sort of enemy would warn us that they were capable of messing with our security system to show they are visiting instead of just hiding their presence?" The Queen couldn't help but ask.

It was her uncle who retorted, "Either someone stupid or making a statement but nobody smart enough to do it would bother with the latter. Otherwise, they certainly wouldn't be able to pull off the former."

“Maybe some other Gremory?” Offered Luvia as a possibility.

Only for Rias to discard it. “Everyone that I knew would either call ahead or show up after classes were over.” At least anyone authorized to mess with her boundary field like her parents or brother.

When they finally arrived at the building the sight before them was quite familiar but also not as Medusa and Yoruichi, in her cat form, were sitting at the couch with three cups in the small table in front of them.

At least that was as far as familiar went to several people in their group but the third person present was odd to just a few even if the sight of her wasn't the same for those who could remember her.

“Seek-chan?” Rias called outloud and the green haired woman turned in her seat making everyone who knew her do a double take at the changes in her appearance.

Her once luscious long hair which in the past could easily be compared to Rias had been cut short to be just above her shoulders, no longer she used Kuoh's uniform opting for clothes that were form fitting with the magic circle of the Agares Clan in the shoulders of her long sleeved dress that highlighted her breasts that also had a mini skirt and a belt to accentuate her legs.

She also wore boots with high tight stockings that matched her blue and white outfit but it wasn't the most eye-catching part of it. No, the thing that had everyone's attention the moment she turned to regard them was the eye patch, or more precisely a blue ribbon, covering her left eye behind her glasses.

Devils as a society had their own sort of fashion but none would use anything capable of impairing their fighting capability so it was either an extremely odd choice, something necessary because of a lack of choice or the sign something terrible had happened.

But before questions could be asked the woman offered her friend a small but honest smile. “Rias, Akeno. I am glad you two are well. It is great everyone is still as united as ever, with even some new members.” She looked around before her eyes settled on the person with the highest authority present before she offered a small curtsy. “Salutations Azazel of Grigori, Governor General, I am Seekvaira Agares, Heiress of the Agares Clan.”

The Governor General offered her his best roguish grin before stepping forward, taking her hand on his own for a kiss “It is a pleasure and an honor to meet you. It seems you are a friend of my students as well.”

“Fufufu, if such an esteemed company like you were teaching on Kuoh during my time as a student then my school life could have been more interesting.”

“You were a student? Three Heiresses of the Pillars were students on Earth at the same

time? In the same place?" Baffled beyond belief Azazel almost couldn't believe her words. "That was quite a big risk. Two were already a tempting target but three?"

Hundreds of questions ran through everyone's brain but they were sensitive enough to not ask. "What happened to you, Agares-san?" All but Shirou who voiced what everyone was thinking with a tone of concern.

The greenish blonde haired woman smiled kindly. "Many things, Emiya-san. Many, many things. But so it happened with you all. Perhaps I should have gone to college since things in Fuyuki got so messed up the moment I was gone."

Elbowing her lover's side, Rias stepped forward. "It is still great you are back in town. If you have called I would have prepared a proper welcome."

"Things have been so busy lately that it completely slipped my mind." Confessed her fellow Heiress with a tired tone. "Still it is great that the school is still standing even if Caliburn now decorates our grounds."

While the pureblood people talked Ise approached Kiba to whisper, "Isn't that-"

"Yes, Seekvaira-senpai was also a devil." The Knight didn't even need to let him finish the question. "Much like Buchou and Kaichou, she used to attend our school until graduation, even using a fake name to better blend in Japan. She decided to return to the Underworld just after graduating to prepare herself to take over her Clan and officially enter the Rating Game circuit."

The Pawn nodded slowly, looking at the beautiful woman who had part of her face covered. "Do you think she is hurt?"

"Should I take a look?" Asia asked them in an even lower volume as she looked at the older devil with concern.

Xenovia hummed in thought before whispering, "We should have met her before, earlier in the year."

"During the Youth Devil Gathering, right?" Kiba asked only for Luvia to hiss.

"While it is good that you all are proving yourselves capable of easy deductions, this situation is a bit delicate so stop talking about lady Agares for a moment." At her fellow Reincarnated devils look of confusion the Rook almost huffed in exasperation. "Something happened and if any of you were paying attention you would notice our King carefully maneuvering around the topic. A topic that may involve her abstinence from one of the most important events for any Heir of a Pillar."

"Tell them everything right in her face, would you, Gorilla?"

"Shut it, Tohsaka."

“Can you two don’t do this right now?” Setsuna’s harsh tone had the two older women shutting up as the hanyou kept watching the conversation. She knew Seekvaira in passing, barely having traded a dozen words with the older woman, and so wouldn’t interfere but would make sure no one else would. ‘A wound around the eye like that can’t be an accident. Not where devils are concerned.’

It was an easy deduction to make but the implications were many, none of them good. However Setsuna wasn’t going to voice her thoughts as she knew Rias had already reached similar conclusions. If anything the Heiress of Gremory was quick to hug her friend during the conversation and began to expand the talks towards helping her relax.

“We really need something to eat while we catch up.” Rias suggested outloud and Shirou saw it as his cue.

“I can speed up dinner and make something special.” He had already accepted his lover was better to that sort of talk both because of her upbringing but also because she was Seekvaira’s friend.

Akeno also saw the hints and moved around with a smile. “Hmmm~ I think Seekvaira never had any of Shirou-kun’s cooking. A shame if I can say.”

“Blasphemy.” Liz didn’t notice the nuances happening around her but her honest opinion was welcome regardless.

Yet all their momentum vanished suddenly when the Agares Heiress smiled kindly once again but shook her head. “Unfortunately I can’t stay here for long. I just wanted to visit my friend and chat a little but things back in the Underworld are a bit hectic for me.”

Shirou once again was about to ask what was the problem but that time he managed to hold his tongue upon looking into Rias’ eyes. His fellow redhead was good at hiding her emotions from almost anyone but he was one of the few who could see the concern, worry and curiosity behind a smile.

“Are you sure? It has been so long and we have a lot of catching up to do.”

“I wish circumstances were better but alas they are not.” Seekvaira raised a hand and brushed her hair around the ribbon but quite a few caught that the gesture had been automatic until the very end. Clearly whatever happened was still bothering the pureblood devil but she recovered quickly, turning around to the two still on the couch. “Lady Medusa, Kuro, it was nice seeing you two again. Thank you for the company.”

The goddess nodded after a little contemplation before saying, “It was good to finally spend some time with you as well, we barely talked when you lived around here.” She was a strange goddess in a strange land and the Heiress had been busy preparing for her final exams. The purple haired girl was present during her departure but they never had anything to discuss. “Now I can officially say I have all of Fuyuki’s Second Owners’ approval.”

“Fufufu, I haven’t been a Second Owner for quite a long while.” Her tone carried an easy to

find nostalgia. “But you always had my approval since Rias trusted Shirou’s judgment. Wait, he is the Mage of Swords now, isn’t he? Perhaps it would be proper to refer to him as such? Even in the Underworld that title has gained a lot of weight.”

“Please don’t.” The redhead in question said smoothly with a concerned expression for the Agares Heiress.

Who chuckled as Yoruichi said. “Well, it is always good to get together for some tea. Now, I remember promising Koneko to teach her a new trick today?”

She had made no such promise but the disguised King of Kyoto knew that whatever Seekvaira needed involved her new appearance and her haunted look. And she had a haunted look, Yoruichi was sure of it. For the younger woman’s sake the nekomata was signaling everyone to occupy themselves while Rias dealt with the situation.

A cue Azazel quickly caught up and hugged Shirou’s shoulder. “Since we have some free time, why don’t we get some research going? Honestly jewel magecraft was never my thing but I know the original work enough to give some tips.”

““I still can’t believe you met the Kaleidoscope.”” Rin and Luvia said at the exact same time before glaring at each other.

“Women, I lived long enough to know almost everybody.” He then turned to the resident goddess. “Yo, Medusa, since you are planning to use jewels for your Faith want to join us? We all could learn a thing or two.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” She, Akeno, Liz and Xenovia began to move with the group of magi and a fallen angel before the goddess turned to her priestess. “Since I will be taking part in some experimental magic today, why don’t you keep your King company?”

It was a weak excuse to free Akeno and have her support Rias but one the Queen would gladly take, bowing to her goddess. “It has been a while since I made my special blend of tea. I better make sure my skills are not rusty.”

If Seekvaira noticed the maneuver or if she had any problems with another person around during what should be a private talk the woman gave no indication. Since she also knew Akeno it could be either reason but all she did was retain a tired smile.

“Shall we go to my office?” Rias offered as the rest of her peerage left for their contracts. With a nod of Seekvaira’s head they all walked to the upper floor of the clubhouse but the redhead was already losing her patience. “Seek-chan... what happened? We were worried when you didn’t show up at the Youth Devil Gathering.”

All amusement and joy left the older woman’s face as her shoulders sagged. “Sorry to worry you all but like I said ‘things happened’.” With just the three of them it was clear the Agares Heiress’ guard was ready to drop. “It is partially the reason why I am here and...”

That time the green haired woman didn’t hesitate to caress her eyepatch before closing her

fist over it with anger before taking a deep breath to let it all go. The whole interaction was weird to Rias and Akeno, both stopping to watch Seekvaira as emotions filled her usually stoic face.

Until they all settled in something between resignation and exhaustion with the King of Gremory's growing worry she didn't bother to hide unlike her Queen whose concern was buried behind her own poker face when she opened the door for the other two to enter first.

Only then did Akeno say, "I will be in the kitchen and the tea will be ready in a few minutes. Unless you want some sweets?"

"No, just tea is fine. I really can't stay too long." Without hesitation Seekvaira sat down on the chair of the office's desk.

Rias nodded to the Hybrid and sat down on the opposite side as the ravenhead left to prepare the tea. "Do you want to wait?"

"Unfortunately my situation truly doesn't allow me to. Today I still have three, the establishment of several contracts of the short term variety and some sales that need to be done." None of those were habits the woman had while in Fuyuki and she was showing how unpleasant some of that work was. "I still need to find a Magician of my own, not even for the Clan as my decisions are still under a lot of scrutiny. Even if the Agares have the least number of Ancient Devils and one of them is just my grandmother they are not giving me any breaks."

"What happened?" Rias' posture completely changed to deal with everything in a business like fashion but her eyes grew cold as she dwelled inside a mentality similar to her mentor's.

For even if she was dealing with a friend the Magus Killer would demand everything was scrutinized impartially.

"Not 'what' but rather 'who'." Seekvaira held her face once again, just above her covered eye.

Trained by the Magus Killer or not, that was enough to make Rias blow up a fuse. "I am going to kill them. Whoever did this to you I will rip their eyes out and-"

"That will probably make matters worse!" Both stopped after the outburst but Seekvaira quickly calmed herself, or pretended to calm herself, before continuing. "This isn't your fault, Rias, not really. But as things stand if we keep going 'an eye for an eye' everyone will end up blind. Especially because I was just collateral and this," she pointed to the ribbon, "is the result of me being careless. While you can get payback for me and even make her suffer, the Council of Elders will step up if you push things too far."

"Her'?" It was obvious who her friend was talking about. "Ravel Phenex?" A nod was all she needed before letting out a sigh and resting her forehead on the back of her hands. "How did she do it? Ravel is the youngest child of the Phenex without anything to inherit. She

shouldn't be able to usurp your position in the Youth Devil Gathering."

"She didn't. I lost it." Rias recoiled in shock and Seekvaira didn't blame her. "I was careless and walked into a trap." Both fell silent for a few minutes until Akeno returned with three cups of tea. She poured for the two purebloods and herself but took hers to the couch where she could see both women but keep a respectable distance. "Part of me wants to say that Ravel was cunning but the moment she challenged me to a Rating Game I should have suspected something was afoot."

"Did she cheat?" Doubtful but the Heiress of Gremory felt the need to check.

After taking a sip of her tea the older devil replied, "Depends on what you consider cheating." She finished her first cup, holding her hand to stop Akeno from pouring anymore. "Don't worry, I am getting used to doing this myself."

"Agares-sama-

"Please, Akeno, we have known each other almost as long as I know Rias. Just used my name as you would if I was still in school."

"Very well, Seekvaira. Where is the rest of your peerage?" The Hybrid asked carefully and almost somberly.

It was enough to make Seekvaira snicker. "Working to the bone to correct my mistakes. The Agares Clan is disappointed with its Heiress and so either I do something or I will lose my position." Unheard of since she both had her Clan's Power and was part of the main family. "That is what we have been doing since I woke up from my coma."

"You were in a coma? How am I hearing about this just now?" Rias demanded and her friend didn't blame her.

"Because missing the Youth Devil Gathering damaged my Clan's reputation and I am still paying for it. Even after waking up and recovering I still was kept in isolation until my parents made sure I understood the size of my mistake." Brushing her eyepatch again she smiled bitterly. "Not that I needed the extra time since I have a constant reminder until I can have the proper surgery."

"But why would you need surgery? Why not fix whatever happened with magic? If it is a matter of money or support I can-" Rias immediately bit her tongue to hold herself back from speaking any further.

Seekvaira gave her a look of understanding and smiled. "... My parents may be disappointed with me but not that much and we both know magic can't fix everything. Actually one of the reasons why I came today was to ask Sona's Knight to try and repair the damage but..."

"Kuzuki-sensei failed."

“From what Lady Animosphere could observe, if he was Medea then maybe Pain Breaker wouldn’t have a time limit. Didn’t Sona tell you I dropped by the Student Council during lunch?”

“We aren’t on speaking terms at the moment...”

Without judgment and a little bemusement, the older devil continued talking. “By the time we all learned about Pain Breaker it had been weeks and my wound had already scarred. The doctors had done their best but the flame of a Phenex is powerful indeed.” Her hand rested on the side of her head, fingers around the ribbon. After a deep breath she removed the accessory and the other women were greeted by a ghoulish sight. “They already told me that once the scar tissue is removed I will need to implant a new eye regardless.”

A fair assessment to make since the skin had been melted around the eye socket and it was easy to notice the abstinence of something beneath it. Seekvaira’s left eye had been destroyed and what was left behind could only be called a mess of tissue the size of a child’s hand.

It wasn’t the biggest of scars but just that there was a scar at all showed how big the damage was since neither Rias or Akeno had seen the Agares Heiress for a while. The former was already doing some math in her mind and could estimate whenever Seekvaira faced Ravel it had been somewhere between two to three months ago at most.

During that time the older woman’s recovery went smoothly since her parents didn’t disown her outright. ‘Based on what she said it would be just the older members of her Clan who tried to punish her.’ Rias deduced while gritting her teeth. ‘Even if she had to get back to work after waking up from a coma and had little space for much else, her peerage would be doing their best to ease her burden which explains their abstinence.’ Taking a deep breath of her own she asked, “If there is anything I can do-”

“We both know I can not ask for anything even if I wanted to.” Seekvaira interrupted with a firm tone, her glare somehow more intense by the abstinence of an eye. “Having your support in any direct fashion would place Agares in your debit regardless of your intentions.”

“As far as I know I still owe you a favor.” The younger woman reminded the older. “You know Shiro’s secret-”

“Part of it and you already paid it back.”

“A paltry tolkien at best because you wanted to ‘stay even’. You could have asked for a fortune, support, hell, even weapons compared to Noble Phantasms like Sona and Truthbearer.” Rias reminded her friend who just stared at her. The redhead didn’t allow that scar to be intimidating. “So don’t think for a second we are ‘even’ in any sense. Besides, friends don’t need debts to help each other.”

“Then a friend should accept the other’s decision to fight her own battles.” Was the swift reply, so fast in fact that it made clear Seekvaira was expecting Rias’ arguments. “Politically it will still harm me and everyone will think that my Clan is a vassal to yours.”

“Bullshit.” Nobody knew if Rias was talking about her argument or the situation.

“It’s politics.” Seekvaira chose to believe the latter.

“Screw politics! If Ravel hurt you it was in a way to get me!”

“And it is working.” Pointed out the green haired woman. “Destroying my eye... she wanted me to suffer and if it was on purpose or not it isn’t relevant. What is relevant is that you will have to face her in your next match and I want her to lose. Badly.”

‘What was that about ‘everyone ending blind’?’ Akeno calmly moved to fill Rias’ cup before standing to the side, no longer willing to sit and allow the other two women to forget about her. “Taking her eye out will be particularly hard. She is a Phenex, it will literally grow back.”

“Flesh heals but what I want you to hurt is the spirit.” The older devil revealed just as calmly as before. “If you want to repay me for any favors, make sure this happens; finish the Phenex matter once for all. One way or another if you don’t take down someone from that Clan will be always bittin in your heels for either honor or pride.”

It was a hard argument to disagree with since before Rias stood the person who suffered because of the unfinished matters with the Phenex. Having no idea it wasn’t properly settled until then the redhead had no guarantees her friend was the only one who suffered and it would be no consolation learning she was the only victim.

Taking a deep breath she entered the state of mind Kiritsugu taught her before looking at Seekvaira coldly. “I hope you aren’t expecting me to kill them all? Neither the public nor the Elder Devils are going to let that slide.”

“Since you are away from the Underworld you don’t know it but the public is actually more on your side than in most of the government’s.” Seekvaira fixed her glasses, something which unsettled Akeno a little as she had a clear view of the scar. “But as I said; if you can’t harm the flesh permanently then you must go after the spirit. You need to break the Phenex Clan completely, Rias, not just economically. I heard you lift some of their restrictions recently,” it was said with some disapproval and a voice in Rias’ head agreed with her friend’s sentiment, “but running them completely would only earn more revenge. No, you must be smarter than that.”

“And do you have a suggestion?” The Heiress of Gremory scowled when the Agares Heiress shrugged. “Of course. Fine, I will think about something and then you can consider us even.” Still with a cold attitude she added, “And I hope you have something to give me some sort of edge in dealing with them. Perhaps talking more about the trap which snared you would be a start?”

A smile returned to Seekvaira’s face as she collected her ribbon and began to tie it around her eye. “I was already planning to tell you everything.” There was some shame in her tone that she tried to disguise it with humor. “As you well know the Phenex Clan fell in dire straits after their third son was dismissed by his fiance. Cost them a pretty penny too.”

“Well that is what they get for paying the reception while the marriage is still in contention.” Akeno said playfully to help the older woman but Rias just gave her a side glance to show she wasn’t playing around.

When her aqua eyes landed back on Seekvaira it was with a coldness behind them that made the older woman shiver. “Right, yes, you obviously remember that.” The Agares Heiress fought her nerves and managed to not stutter. “Despite their recent problems the Phenex Clan, thanks to the Phoenix Tears, still had one thing that most Pillars failed to foster amongst themselves; contacts.”

“You approached them?” Rias asked coldly.

“No, I was approached. For that alone I should have suspected a trap but since they were in dire economic straits I thought they were trying to gather more funds.” Seekvaira tried to defend herself but clearly the redhead wasn’t interested. “It was Ravel herself who asked for a meeting in our floating city when I was there for a routine inspection. Since my Clan is the second most powerful then it wasn’t odd they wanted to trade with us.” With a hand massaging the other the green haired woman tried to calm herself down. “Ravel, I didn’t know her before nor tried to but had heard enough to believe she was a typical noble girl; a little spoiled, too confident but with a keen eye for strategy if her reputation in her brother’s peerage was any indication.” There was a pause as she gathered her thoughts. “Her wanting to negotiate wasn’t exactly strange since nobody has seen Riser since...”

“Since I humiliated him.” The Crimson-Haired Ruin Princess said to get the words out of the way. Then she scoffed. “If anything that is just more disappointing.”

“Buchou?”

“I will never give sympathies to that man, Akeno, but considering he was chosen by my parents and wanted to marry me so badly he fought for it, I expected a little more of a spine.”

“You think he is missing out on his own volition?” The Queen asked cautiously, her eyes jumping between the two pureblood devils.

“Only the Phenex can say.” The Crimson-Haired Ruin Princess said, her eyes focusing on Seekvaira. “So Ravel shows up in Agares’ Territory, in one of your mines, your main source of income. That is already suspicious...”

The other pureblood devil shook her head. “Or desperate. When Alivian informed me of her arrival I was surprised for a moment but it made sense.” At least that was what she told her Queen in the past. “With the Phenex situation-”

“Skip your reasons to hear her and tell us about how Ravel trapped you.” The King of Gremory pretty much ordered which surprised the two women. “Unless, of course, the contents of that meeting are relevant?”

Moving past her friend's attitude the older woman did as ordered anyway. "As I said, the Phenex still have contacts and a more amicable situation with the other Pillars. Your EM may have caused some stir but they still hold a lot of good will." After waiting a moment to see if Rias would want her to skip anything else she continued. "When I arrived at the meeting room I was shocked because I saw something I never thought I would in a thousand years; Ravel Phenex, standing there with a pink dress and several burns on her face, neck and hands."

The shock from that information was enough to snap Rias from her focused state of mind. "A Phenex burned?" The only time she saw something similar was during her Rating Game versus Riser.

Yet, even as the man was retired after a beating of a lifetime, Rias remembered vividly that his flames kept healing him despite the damage of having holy water rain in his body. He would be fine after a few hours, she was sure of it, yet there was another Phenex recently burned and from what she was hearing those lasted a while.

"The Power of Immortality can heal even Holy damage, given time. A burn should be nothing." Akeno pointed out, unable to hide her shock while also confirming her King's thoughts. Neither managed to hide their surprise but the Queen was more vocal. "It certainly did eventually since nobody saw a single burn during the Youth Devil Gathering."

Understanding how unbelievable her story sounded already, Seekvaira held a hand to her chest before saying, "But she was burned, I swear to you. I swear on my and my Clan's honor!"

"We believe you." Rias doubted her friend would lie about that. "It is strange, very strange, but the Phenex can be burned by Holy like any devil so she must have had a bad encounter with someone who used it... Or maybe other substances can do something similar. We have no way to say for sure what happened but let's focus on the facts we have."

Seekvaira nodded with shame but her remaining eye held some conviction. "And I want you, I need you, to understand why I feel in that trap, if just for my peace of mind, please." She saw the redhead let out a sigh but it was followed by a nod. "Thank you. Now, it was obvious that her dress was hiding even more wounds and Ravel made for a sorry sight from the get go. That made me lower my guard a little. At least until negotiations began then it was business as usual." At least that was what she believed but neither Gremory representative thought she was being fully sincere.

Entering into a contract with sympathy meant the Agares Heiress left herself exposed and both could see Ravel abusing that fact. 'She is, was, Riser's strategist.' Rias paid attention as the older devil described the negotiations and truly it was a standard affair.

Ravel spoke of a contact or two that would be interested in dealing with the Agares Clan in a more intimate fashion, Seekvaira admitted to feign disinterest while already planning to accept and the youngest of the Phenex must have seen through that or so the redhead believed.

“The moment I entertained the matter I had already fallen into her trap.” The older devil confessed. “No matter what I offered, Ravel’s goal was to overprice whatever sensible proposition I had.” Seekvaira sounded exhausted once again. “Bargaining went badly but obviously that was on purpose, part of the trap. After several minutes of back and forth I lost my patience and asked her to leave... Ravel looked surprisingly meek then and tried a more down to earth offer. Several tons of stone from our mines, the same stones that are used for Evil Pieces.” She chuckled without humor. “Again part of the trap since it was an offer I couldn’t accept, one she made saying the Phenex needed the resources urgently.”

“But still scandalous enough to show a big amount of despair since she could use it to turn her family’s finances around. Hell, if it was a literal ton then it would be enough to turn anyone’s finances around.” Rias didn’t know the specifics about the rocks which Evil Pieces were made off other than they were powerful and the Agares Territory held the monopoly but they were in high demand either for study or for new Evil Pieces. Nobody could be promoted to High Class without those. “And her last resort was...”

“She challenged me to an unofficial Rating Game.” The redhead let out a sigh as the ravenhead eyes widened in shock. Seekvaira suspected the reasons behind Akeno’s reaction. “As young as she was I doubted that Ravel had any Pieces and obviously I pointed that out. She claimed to have acquired them recently. Still not believing it, she offered me a couple of days to deliberate about the offer.” The Agares Heiress smiled sadly. “Again part of the trap because she knew I would investigate her claims and see that truly Ravel Phenex had three devils registered as her Pieces; a Pawn, a Rook and a Knight. Barely a peerage at all.”

“She fudged the numbers?” Akeno asked with suspicion.

“Too illegal, there must be something else.” Rias replied. “And just three pieces? Even despair has limits, you should have caught on to that.”

“Like when you challenged Riser with a half completed peerage at best?” The Hybrid shot back with a frown that made the Crimson-Haired Ruin Princess’ expression grow cold as her best friend turned back to the older pureblood. “That was it, wasn’t it? She leaned in her despaired act further and you feel for it.”

Seekvaira could only nod. “The contract was too good to be true. With it the Agares Clan would be elevated to the most rich and well connected in all the Underworld. I even read the fine print but... I didn’t care...” The older woman hit the table in anger. “I didn’t care that I was betting my invite to the Youth Devil Gathering, indirectly as it was because I thought there was no way to lose nor that she could use the contract if I were to lose. “ Admitted the older devil in shame, a tear threatening to drop from her eye.

“A technicality?” Rias asked gently and her friend nodded.

“My position in future events under a certain time frame I am deemed indisposed. You two can see what I am inferring, can’t you?” The two younger women did but she said it anyway, “She put me in a coma on purpose. Her whole plan was to make sure I would be unable to attend the Gathering from the very beginning and she would have the right to take my

place.” Even if she hadn’t lost consciousness for over a week, which she did, the damage done left Seekvaira unable to do anything for days giving Ravel the chance to take over her spot. “Didn’t even cross my mind that she was scheduling our match that close to the Youth Devil Gathering. I thought she wanted opportunities to establish more contacts or even get a meeting with you.” Rias couldn’t see either hypothesis being true but kept her mouth shut. “Not that it makes any difference. I probably would have gone ahead with it anyway since I thought I couldn’t lose.” Fury replaced sadness as her aura took shape. It was strong but not enough to bother the other women, just a show of rage. “The contacts she was offering were just too tempting to let the opportunity pass by. They would help push the Agares Clan to new heights, maybe even make us strong enough to challenge Zekram Bael.”

‘That is a fantasy and a half.’ Rias wasn’t going to say it but she doubted the Phenex Clan had enough to dislodge the Oldest Devil from his seat of power. Bother him maybe but not outright challenge him.

Which was why Rias was fully willing to abandon the Underworld and the Gremory in case she lost her match against Riser. As far as she was concerned, Underworld’s politics was a game with marked cards and the only way for anyone to truly beat it was to not play. That or flip everything upside down by force but using contracts wasn’t ever going to work.

So long Zekram Bael existed the man was never going to let go of his power and even if the Phenex Clan had the capability to challenge the Oldest Devil they would have done it by themselves, not surrender their advantages with a contract made by a fourth daughter.

But once again the Heiress of Gremory kept her mouth shut, sipping in her tea as Seekvaira moved past her reasons to actually talk about why she had lost the match. “Of course I suspected foul play of some kind and it turned out I was right. The three devils, their names weren’t familiar to me but they were already registered to previously belong to another Phenex, Riser.” Her eyes settled on Rias but the redhead barely reacted. “Isolated or not it isn’t odd that some of his peerage may be working under other members of his family since he is indisposed. It certainly made her challenge more credible.”

Rias nodded in agreement. “For all his defects, Riser was an experienced fighter with a good team for Rating Games. It makes it look like Ravel was counting on quality instead of quantity.” Yet something didn’t sit well with her. “But only ‘makes’ it look like it since I am sure there wasn’t any Pawn, Rook or Bishop worthy of mention on Riser’s side. Besides Ravel herself, that is.”

When the King of Gremory turned to her, Akeno could only nod in agreement. “I would think differently if it was Yubelluna, the Queen, but I agree with Buchou.”

“Oh but I faced her, we faced all of them.” Seekvaira cut in with a poisonous glare. Those words, more than her expression, made Rias frown. “Since it wasn’t an official Rating Game there wouldn’t be any penalty for changes in her peerage so long as they were properly registered under Ravel.”

“When you say all of them...” Akeno tried gently.

“Almost all of Riser Peerage is now registered as Ravel Peerage.” Revealed Seekvaira with hatred. “I had some subordinates watching the official records until the last hour when we would need to start preparing for the match. One of them contacted me as soon as I woke up; the minute before the Rating Game started the whole peerage had changed as nine people were suddenly added.” The news shocked both members of the ORC.

But it didn't take long for Rias to deduce what happened. “It appears the Phenex reach extends even inside the government, at least inside the Register of Pieces and Reincarnated Beings.”

“It is the only explanation as they skipped weeks of forms and almost filled her whole peerage in such a short time period.” If anything that was like pouring salt of the wound for the older devil and made her hate the situation even more.

“Impressive.” Only to suddenly feel a whiplash in her mood as instead of solidarity she found Rias expressing wonder, much to Seekvaira's shock. “A very cunning trap with multiple stages with the only risk of failure was if you accepted to pay too much for something the Phenex wouldn't lose even if they had to share it.”

“You are admiring this? Admiring how your enemy, your **enemy**, placed me in this situation?!”

“If I don't respect Ravel's cunning then I will be the next one to fall for her plots. Until we know her exact goals I will consider that whatever she has planned for me is worse than anything she did to you.” Rubbing her chin the Heiress of Gremory added, “Also how she adapted the very thing that doomed her Clan to this situation against you; greed.”

“‘Greed’? You are saying that I am like this over ‘greed’?” If the green haired woman had less control over her emotions she would have challenged her fellow noble to a fight then and there. “All that I wanted was to elevate my Clan, a duty we have been raised for since little. You know that, Rias Gremory.”

Lowering her hands so she could show her full attention was on her friend, the redhead replied. “Just saying how I see it. Wishing to do better is nice, wishing to leave things better than before you arrived is commendable.” She said in an effort to calm her fellow Heiress. “But there is such a thing as ‘too good to be true’. Both you and the Phenex Clan just ignored it and took a risk, them with me, you with Ravel.” Shaking her head she concluded, “From the very start she had an agenda and all she placed on the table were propositions with no risks for her and all the risk for you. You took the bait and unless you acknowledge your mistakes, History will repeat itself.”

After hearing that warning Seekvaira calmed down slightly. “Hmph, I suppose you are right. In any case Riser- no, Ravel Peerage steamrolled my own with ease once the game began.” Nobody was surprised by that, they were an experienced peerage of considerable power. “While the spells to rescue me may have been tampered with...” She added while caressing her covered eye, “There was no indication of cheating. It was fair, as fair as it can be called having professional Rating Gamers fighting against a bunch of newbies.” Truly if she knew

Riser's former Pieces were her opponents she would never have signed the contract. "How did you defeat them?"

"Strategy, mostly." Also a good deal of power but considering Rias already upset Seekvaira she wasn't willing to point that out. Nor her belief her friend's peerage wasn't strong enough to be any real competition. "We also knew what to expect which you didn't. Can you at least tell me if they acquire any new Noble Phantasms?"

"If they did, they didn't use any in our match." And Seekvaira didn't even want to think how much worse things would have gone if they had. "While all their equipment was of high quality none of them reached the levels of Noble Phantasms. I can confirm with certainty that during my Rating Game, besides some small enchantments, their weapons and armor were standard..."

"And?" Rias asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Tch, I want to say we lost because of some secret weapon or something but the truth is that my peerage was just outmatched. Every single member of Ravel Peerage was twice as strong or more than any of us." For a devil admitting weakness could already be a hard pill to swallow, especially against someone younger. Seekvaira felt like she was trying to swallow a giant needle, even more so with her next words. "Ravel herself... Rias, I don't know what she did to prepare for that game or what sort of training she had but her power..."

Akeno noticed how the older woman began to shake and moved to pour more tea. "Do you want something to eat? Perhaps some cookies? Koneko-chan doesn't know but we all know she has a pot with Shirou-kun's special cookies hidden underneath one of the floorboards."

Turning to her friend's Queen for a moment the green haired woman chuckled before saying, "Thank you for trying to distract me but I must force myself to face the facts." Still she took a sip of the tea, regardless of tremors. "Ravel challenged me to a fight, certainly to make sure that to hurt me enough to place me in a coma while allowing her peerage to walk scot free."

Accidents like that happened all the time in Rating Games, it just couldn't be helped as despite how good the spells protecting the participants lives were they needed to allow enough leeway so no one was taken out by mistake.

Even the fact the game was unofficial wasn't really a problem since it wasn't surprising to find younger nobles practicing with their peers or family. There was nobody willing to really punish them anyway since the older nobles would only see the benefits so the younger ones wouldn't get punished.

It was the weakness of a biased system but Rias couldn't even complain since that was what allowed her to escape an unwanted marriage. "So she is using Riser's former peerage in the Youth Devil Tournament?" A nod of confirmation had the redhead humming. "Hmm, this doesn't change things much since we already have experience against them but I doubt Ravel is the only one who trained after our victory."

"Not only that but you can bet they will take us seriously from the very beginning this time,

Buchou.” Akeno reminded the pureblood devils who nodded. “Last time our opening gamble only paid off because they treated the match like they would any other. Later in the match they were fighting seriously but we still had the advantage of terrain and surprise.”

“Indeed. Tricks like that won’t work again.” Rias looked at Seekvaira who was obviously waiting for more questions. “Can you be more specific about Ravel’s increase of power? Or any of the others?”

A shake of the head and a scowl were the Agares Heiress’ initial reply. “Hard to do since they haven’t competed in any games after Riser’s defeat other than against myself and Diodora.” With a snap of her fingers a magic circle dropped several documents on the table and she gently removed a disc from inside it. “These are all the reports from my peerage about what they learned during the Rating Game to the smallest detail. Unfortunately you won’t learn anything about Ravel Peerage’s true prowess from Diodora’s match but I made sure to get the recording for you, just in case.”

Rias took the offered disc with a pensive expression. “Why do you think it won’t do any good?”

“Because the match was as bland and boring as it could possibly be without being either rehearsed or a set up.” Seekvaira revealed which made her fellow Heiress blink with surprise. “The battlefield was basically a small town and there were plenty of spots for traps and ambushes but besides a token effort both sides basically pulled off a firework show with little substance.” She explained with clear hostility in her tone. “Sure they demonstrated their power but to any devil worth their salt or anyone politically savvy it is rather obvious backroom deals were struck to make that match as uneventful as possible.”

Giving the disc a harsh look as if it offended her, Akeno asked, “Who won?”

“Ravel and I swear it was like a corny movie from the 90s.” Seekvaira scoffed. “It was pretty obvious from the beginning that none in Diodora Peerage, pardon the pun, holds a candle compared to Ravel Peerage and yet...” She threw her hands up in frustration. “Both sides basically traded Pieces blow for blow. Almost all from Astaroth’s side could use magic but were clear supporters with their best effort being at the end when three of them, including their Queen mind you, joined forces to empower Diodora. It is like only he knows how to fight.” There was much more she wanted to say but the target of her anger was Ravel, not the other blond. “The whole match was just a sham if you want my opinion. Not that no one is going to call it in public since it was passable enough for the VIPs.” Another scowl marred her beautiful face. “You will agree with me once you watch the video. The whole thing ended with the Bomb Queen invading the enemy base with a huge explosion to basically accept Diodora’s surrender in a tasteful manner.”

“In other words; an honorable defeat.” Rias deduced as she began to sort through the reports with a scowl of her own. “Nobody will care if it looks flashy enough. If there is one thing I will give to most competitions on Earth is that fixed matches are very frowned upon.” The redhead shook her head with disappointment. “Then again, obviously someone is trying to keep her cards close to her chest and since Ravel is my next opponent she doesn’t even need to do this for long.” A picture of Diodora shaking hands with Yubelluna caught her

attention. "This also explains why this coward hasn't contacted me already."

Noticing the picture of their fellow Heir in the redhead's hand made Seekvaira frown. "Why would Diodora contact you?"

"Because he is trying to court Asia, one of my Bishops." Rias added the last part knowing that Seekvaira wouldn't know the former Holy Maiden. "He already sent several gifts and tried to bribe some people to find where she lives..." The picture was Destroyed between her fingers. "He avoiding me makes a lot of sense if he is really so smitten with my Bishop while also plotting my downfall."

"To be fair that is kinda common in the Underworld."

"It is normal in every government. If there is stabbing or not is the only significant change." Then Rias noticed her Queen's intense stare in some of the documents. "Something wrong, Akeno?"

The ravenhead gathered some pictures and placed them above all others. "Nuns. All of them are dressed as nuns."

"He probably has some kind of fetish." Seekvaira said with an uninterested shrug.

But Rias ignored her and completely focused on the pictures. "You are right. Some of the uniforms are different but..." Blue, green and black, all with white highlights, collars or sleeves, all very conservative. "And suddenly I am extremely glad that Asia has no interest in pursuing a relationship with him."

"Oh my~ She told you that today?" Asked the Hybrid with a sincere smile which was reciprocated.

"Yes, I was planning a celebration for after she tells him off, in her own 'Asia' way. Now we definitely are going to have one." Because Rias was growing increasingly untrusting of Diodora. But she shoved that in the corner of her mind and focused on Ravel Peerage's pictures. "Sure enough, that is almost all of them."

"I can't see Burent or Marion in them." Akeno found Rias' look of confusion amusing. "You may remember them as the maids from Riser Peerage. Perhaps they are still with their King?"

"They are still registered to him." Seekvaira revealed while drawing a paper with that information as well as Ravel Peerage. "Everybody else was transferred to his sister in a simple trade of Pieces. Since Ravel hadn't a single servant under her name before-

"She just needed to give a new set of Evil Pieces to her brother and the trade would be done." Rias concluded while sorting out the pictures and any information about Diodora Peerage. There wasn't much since he wasn't Seekvaira's focus. "We can keep all this, right?"

“All yours, just make sure to deal with Ravel permanently.”

Hating to repeat herself, Rias rolled her eyes before saying. “I already said I won’t kill her.”

“Then figure something else out.” The older woman pointed to her hidden scar as she lost all patience and any pretense of subtlety. “If you don’t finish this with her and the Phenex, this will happen with someone else. Or their future can be put in jeopardy just by associating with one of you...” The green haired woman calmed herself before saying something she would regret.

Yet the redhead got the message as they both knew from the beginning she had been a deliberate target on Ravel’s crusade. “I will finish this. Don’t worry. I will put the Phenex, or at least Ravel, in a position where they can’t hurt us any more.” A plan was already forming in her mind and she separated Diodora’s files to focus on her next opponent’s. “We are already aware of much of what the Phenex can do but your team’s insight will help us settle the score.”

Biting her lip, Seekvaira shook her head. “Would you believe me if I said I think they were holding back?”

“I would expect as much.” Rias didn’t want it to sound cold or arrogant but it was the truth. “She is aiming to take me down and we are friends. Obviously she knows you are going to tell me what you can.”

“Nevertheless it is helpful.” Akeno spoke in consolation even as she read about Yubelluna and found nothing new. “Mayhaps even techniques and skills they didn’t have a chance to show in our Rating Game.” She pondered while raising a paper with details about the Pawns. ‘My, my, fire chainsaws? That sounds dangerous~’

Seekvaira nodded her head. “Thank you, Rias, Akeno.”

“Don’t think too much about it.” The redhead placed the papers down and looked at her friend with sympathy but determination. “If anything, this is my problem to solve. It is just lasting longer because I thought that hitting the Phenex financially would have been enough to cowl their Clan.” A mistake she wouldn’t repeat. “This time I will make sure to break the resolve as well, from every single one of them if necessary. That I swear.”

The Heiress of Agares nodded with a vindictive smile on her lips. “Knowing you, Ravel won’t even see what is coming.” Looking at a clock on the wall she stood up. “Well, I did what I came to do, it is time to go back to work.”

“Already?” Rias’ eyes lost all their coldness as she looked at her friend with concern.

The older devil nodded. “My situation isn’t favorable by any means. While my Clan wasn’t truly affected by my abstinence on the Youth Devil Gathering that cost me many opportunities.” Between contracts, prestige and her welcome into adulthood under the nobles eyes, Seekvaira also lost everything that came with that and the very thing Ravel used as a bargain chip to trap her; influence. “Before I become Lady Agares there is much to

do and if I don't acquire the necessary amount of political capital, both to further the interests of my Clan and for my own prestige, I will probably be disinherited."

"Your parents wouldn't do that!" Rias shouted while standing up, Akeno with a look of equal shock.

"You forget the Ancient Devils have enough influence to push for such things. My family isn't all of the Clan, after all." She already wondered which cousin would take her place and was even happy she didn't have a sibling. Because if she had Seekvaira knew her parents would push them to be the next Heir while hiding her from the limelight. "Don't worry, I still have time."

The members of Gremory nodded in acceptance and escorted the green haired devil to their magic circle room which the woman would use to travel to the Underworld. "It was good to see you, Seek-chan. Despite the circumstances." Rias said with a radiant smile as she did miss her friend. "I am glad you are well."

"Well is relative but the feeling is appreciated." Seekvaira then smiled and hugged her friend. "But I am glad to see you too. You and Sona... you two are going to high places with big dreams, aren't you?" She said while taking a step back but the redhead held her arms.

"We will wait for you." Then her eyes grew serious. "I will deal with Ravel, Seek-chan, I promise."

"I believe you. Maybe you will do what Sairaorg did?" At the looks of confusion from the younger women she chuckled. "Ask Sona to see his Rating Game against Zephyrdor, I left the disc with her."

"Oh, so Saira already dealt with that idiot."

"You sound disappointed, Buchou."

"I wanted a piece of him myself for making Sona upset."

"Fufufu, she had a similar reaction." Seekvaira informed them and the three giggled. "Thanks again for having me."

"Come visit whenever you want and if you need help--"

"You know how politics work."

Akeno raised her hand with her best smile. "We will only have problems if we are caught."

"Your Queen is still an imp." Seekvaira said with finality before stepping into the magic circle. "Good luck, both of you. Hope next time we see each other we don't need to conspire against anyone."

With that she was gone as Rias replied, "And what other pastime we would have?"

Once the two of them were alone Akeno commented with a serious expression, "Considering the number of restrictions you imposed on the Phenex Clan, I am surprised Ravel is getting away with this without losing her magic or worse."

"Because the contract was with the Lord for the Clan. If she is acting by herself or with outside support, technically she isn't violating the Geas." Which told Rias her opponent had more support in the shadows and she could guess from who. "The Traditionalists really must not like my face."

"I wonder why~" Replied the Queen playfully as they left the teleportation room. "Still getting away with a technicality means she is also acting indirectly."

"Doesn't matter how she is planning my downfall, what matters is that she hurt our friend." Power pulsed around the Heiress of Gremory who was already itching to get the fight started. "She will pay for that."

Rias Gremory didn't believe in 'an eye for an eye' as a policy.

To her it was the whole head or heart, no other restitution would suffice and even if killing was off the table there were other ways to get proper payback.

...

Inside a huge bathroom made of ivory the sound of a shower could be heard with an echo as it stood in the center of the huge space that could easily hold two or three cars in its pristine chamber with a small empty pool and fountains for when multiple people wanted to use it at the same time.

Not in that moment and not while that particular woman occupied the room as she washed herself with slow and deliberate moves as small explosions of flames left her form with every drop that touched her skin.

Vapor filled the bathroom as she took care of her developing womanly curves which proved she was still a girl entering womanhood. They had grown plenty more defined over the last few months as she prepared herself in body and in mind for a self given task. Power flowed under her skin and out as she couldn't relax in the bath as many others could.

No, the blonde young woman kept her eyes closed while focusing both in her hygiene and in her magic as the cold water turned into vapor because of her flame. A flame that she had strengthened to the point that no normal water could put out. Soap and shampoo stood in a silver plate over a wall and soon she began to tend her hair.

Hair that was once short like her mother's but had grown as much as her body and could easily reach her upper back. Another symbol of her change as she stopped asking people to take care of it and began to wash it herself despite her position. Or because of it since she wouldn't risk hurting someone in the shower.

Dangerous as her fire could be and as focused as she needed to remain, the blonde haired woman still found pleasure in taking care of her hair. She had decided to no longer cut it at least until it reached her lower back, perhaps further depending how it looked or how much work it gave her after.

Nonetheless, in time washing her hair became a form of meditation for Ravel and it grew increasingly easy for her to lose herself in the process. Plans, schemes and plots all disappeared from her mind as she focused on the task, her hands unable to make bubbles as they were too hot for anything to survive.

The only thing left from her touch, even in her hair, was vapor and couldn't be otherwise since that would mean she failed in her training. A training she began a few days after her last defeat, a training so intense her family called her mad. Ravel didn't blame them but her brother's defeat inspired her in many ways.

To make sure she wasn't going to bother anyone, the Sole Daughter of Phenex, a stupid nickname given after her 'victory' over Diodora, had that special bathroom built together with other facilities to help in her training.

While her Clan was starting to fall in dire straits with their funds restricted by the Gremory Clan, she had plenty of 'pocket money' to have it all done. Truth was that before their decline Ravel had little reason to spend her own money and Riser did pay her for working as his strategist.

A blessing in disguise for when her beloved brother's mind cracked under the weight and brutality of his defeat, Ravel already had the means to seek revenge. It didn't matter she had none of her family or Clan's support because of the Geas and their own limitations, she was her brother's strategist for a reason.

Ravel grew strong as the months passed and her plans bore fruit. 'Soon, Rias. Soon, I will tear you down from your pedestal.' Thought the blonde noble as her eyes snapped open when she felt someone invade her territory. A friend and an ally but an invader nonetheless. "What can I do for you, Yubelluna?"

Dangerous for any other devil other than Ravel Phenex, Yubelluna didn't dare to take more than a step inside the bathroom as the heat and vapor pricked her skin. "You have been here for quite some time. Too much time, my lady. We must return to the Underworld."

Turning off the shower she threw her friend a curious glance. "Really? Has it been that long or are you just exaggerating?" Ravel asked her Queen in a playful tone. When failing to get a response she smiled while moving towards the empty pool. "Our match is still going to be in a few days so we don't need to rush." Said the blonde as she activated a magic circle with a wave of her hand.

Several valves around the walls opened and a fountain in the center of the bathroom began to fill. "Forgive my imprudence, my lady, but we still have much to prepare."

Looking at Yubelluna it was possible to see how the woman was fighting back to remain in place while ignoring the heat. “No, at this point most of the preparations are complete and everything else is out of our hands. All we have left is to train and plan.”

“It may be so but my lady, please, it is time to leave the baths. You have been here for almost three hours.” The Queen of Phenex pointed out. “That can’t be safe considering-”

“I am already used to it. The baths are surprisingly the best place to think once you don’t need to fear for your Element.” Wings of fire sprouted from Ravel’s back but those were different from when she fought in her brother’s peerage.

They were huge, taller than her whole body and even taller than Yubelluna who always watched them with amazement because if she didn’t know any better she would believe they were the wings of an angel.

It would be easy to do as the fire ‘feathers’ gave it a plumage unlike any other that the water reflected much like it would the sun. The temperature of the room grew higher by several degrees with their appearance and for a moment Yubelluna debated summoning her staff and forming a barrier for herself.

‘This is like the hottest sauna in the world. No, a volcano with just a single pool of lava surrounded by a lake...’ She admired her new King’s proud back as four ‘tails’ made of fire feathers floated above the ivory. ‘The nest of a true Phoenix.’

For that was the only description her and the other former members of Riser Peerage could give to Ravel’s new form. Those orange wings were majestic to the point that any doubt about following the younger sister of their loved one was crushed. Sure they will always be faithful to Riser but until he recovered Ravel was a worthy devil for them to follow.

More so when she invited them with promises of power and a rematch with Rias Gremory, an opportunity to recover their honor while perhaps snapping their true King from the funk he fell into after their defeat.

And Ravel kept her promise by forcing herself to the harshest training she could imagine, something that no member of the Phenex Clan dared to try before her. The women from Riser’s harem were quick to push themselves further as well, inspired by the sight of the petite blonde turning into a proper leader.

“*A bonafide Phoenix.*” As Karlamine had proudly declared.

Only when Ravel’s toe fully sunk in the water and the vapor grew more intense was that Yubelluna snapped from her reverie. “My lady-”

“I am not done, Luna, I can feel it. My power can still grow... I haven’t reached my ceiling yet...” When her wings touched the water almost all of it vanished from the pool in an instant. She rested her back carefully to not damage the ivory. “Besides, it isn’t like we have anything to do in the Underworld proper but wait for the Rating Game anyway. We may as well do it where we can grow stronger.”

As much as the older devil wanted to agree she knew nowhere in the Phenex Territory would be capable of holding the quantity of water Ravel evaporated in her training every day. 'Much less that specific type of water. Only the Human Realm can.' Clearing her throat she said, "We still need to make sure everything is in place, my lady."

"Does everyone have their equipment ready?"

The question was sudden but the Bomb Queen wasn't surprised. "Yes. Our countermeasures for the Red Dragon Emperor are also confirmed to work, even if just against lesser dragons."

Ravel ignored the last part as she turned around in her pool with her wings outside and her flames touching nothing. Water was still evaporating constantly with the heat alone. "Our allies in the Underworld sent word?"

"It seems the rules for this tournament always favor those considered the less experienced, at least when speaking about Kings." Yubelluna couldn't help but chuckle. Considering her whole team had fought in several official Rating Games, a rule like that was very biased in their favor as Ravel was the youngest contestant.

Yet she showed neither amusement nor pleasure. "Then we already know the battlefield will benefit us in some way even if no one can give us the details. Even if the rules didn't benefit us, the people on the top would find another way." All between the lines and nothing direct but Sona benefited from their fear of Rias and so would Ravel. "People like them hate change and we are technically fighting against it."

Yubelluna almost couldn't believe the giddy laugh her new King allowed to escape but shook her head and pushed forward. "In that case it would be wise to return and court those people." The Bomb Queen suggested and the vapor vanished as Ravel brushed her suggestion with a wave of her hand. "My lady?"

"Forget about them, they will be my problem if I decide to pursue a career in the Rating Game circuit. After all, I have nothing to inherit so my popularity won't matter otherwise." Her wings had returned to her back and the water was finally allowed to fill the pool again.

"There are some words about making you-"

"Ruval is the Heir and future Lord. Nothing those old goats say will change that."

"Still, my lady, we will return to Riser-sama once this tournament is done. It would be a good idea for you to look for alliances that can help you find Pieces who will be both loyal and strong." Yubelluna was only looking out for her and Ravel understood that.

She just didn't care. "So our weapons are ready, the battlefield is set and the politics are irrelevant. Why then do we need to go back when the better thing to do is get ready until the last moment?" The question was obvious rhetoric but Ravel turned to stare at her Queen's eyes, looking for a challenge. Disappointedly the purple haired women bowed in reverence.

“Thought so. We will go back to Phenex Territory the day before the Rating Game so everyone has time to rest, not a minute sooner. Have I made myself clear, Yubelluna?”

Fighting against the heat and remembering that it was still Ravel, someone she knew since the pureblood was a child, the Queen shook her head in denial. “My lady, while I understand your-”

“I said ‘have I made myself clear, Yubelluna?’” The older woman lost her voice as the heat suddenly grew insufferable as all water in the place evaporated in an instant. Still sitting there naked as the day she was born, the young woman’s dark blue eyes had an orange hue. “Well?”

The message was as clear as the power expanding from the blonde’s petite form, Ravel was no longer the same person the Yubelluna had watched grow up nor was she the Riser’s Bishop.

That girl was replaced by a noble lady capable of a stare as cold as her flames were hot and with a power that already surpassed the Bomb Queen’s. It would be hard for the older woman to believe if she hadn’t witnessed the lengths Ravel had gone to reach that level in a couple of months.

More than one of their Peerage thought the newest King of the Phenex had gone mad but the results spoke for themselves. Her power far surpassed everyone’s in her peerage and her determination to grow stronger only grew over the time.

A fire had been lit in Ravel’s soul because of Rias and she stoked them constantly in search of new heights to surpass the redhead.

Yubelluna managed to gulp despite her dry throat, lowering her head once again. “Crystal, my lady.”

While slightly disappointed, Ravel still did her best to say playfully, “Then leave if you don’t want to get cooked.”

“... I will come back by dinner.” The Bomb Queen closed the door on her way out, leaving the Sole Daughter of Phenex alone with the water.

Water that quickly filled the pool despite some of it evaporating whenever touching Ravel. Not all of it but more than enough to still turn the place into a sauna. Flames danced around her skin in several spots the water touched and the blonde woman managed to keep her poker face intact despite being alone.

But in being alone and having no need to hide it didn’t take long for her to crack, her arm moving slightly a little too much and a few drops of water falling in her eyes. She closed them at the enormous feeling of pain and soon an orange glow shone behind the eyelid before she opened them again.

Her eye was fine, her body also touched by flames as it was 'burned' constantly only for her Immortality to heal the wounds an instant after. Again and again the water acted like acid and tried to melt the devil while her fire preserved the Phenex. A paradoxical cycle to any other being it was only afforded to her Clan but even that situation was unusual for any of them.

For only Ravel had been determined enough to sink into waters that would have been poison to all devilkind and control both her power in such a way that she could not only survive in them but use that cycle as a wheel to push herself forward.

Raising a hand with a small amount of water in it, barely enough to fill the smallest cup in the world, the woman brought it to her mouth and instantly swallowed the liquid. An instant later she began to cough as her body rejected that water but she held her throat and swallowed it like her life depended on it.

In truth it was the opposite and her organs were punished by her audacity but in a few seconds that water had been completely destroyed by her flames as Immortality didn't allow her to die.

'Terrible.' Ravel couldn't help but think. 'It is always so terrible but...' "Heh heh heh-" She began coughing several times before leaving the pool to ease her suffering. "Hehe. It hurts so much... Lady Rias..." Her eyes began to shine. "I can't wait... for you to feel that too... to show everyone this power."

Her wings expanded once again and all water vanished from the area.

For she burned like a Phoenix.

"I can't wait to teach you this pain."

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