

Brothers In Arms

Von Khaosprinz

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Chapter 1

When Nero stepped out of the car, his surroundings did not provide the picture he had anticipated. He looked around, slightly awed at the advanced looking technology and modern buildings. And were those robots at the pizza stand...?

Dante let out a low whistle. Seemed like he was a bit surprised as well. But well, neither of them had ever heard of this place called *Yokohama City* in the middle of nowhere before, especially since it wasn't in Japan as the name suggested. That seemed to be a regional thing, though, considering they had passed signposts pointing towards places called *Kyoto City* and even *London City* on their way here. The people living here didn't seem very creative, at least when it came to naming their towns. These robot-machines, however, proved their technical capabilities. *And their firepower*, Nero added mentally, warily eyeing a robot with a gun as thick as his body stomping past.

"Done staring, kid? I know this looks impressive, but we're here for a job. Although I guess these things make one wonder why they'd need any outside help at all. I doubt most demons could withstand being shot in the face by one of these."

Nero shot his partner a look but complied and grabbed his *Red Queen* off the beaten and dirty car's backseat, strapping it to his back. He slammed the door shut, shooting the vehicle a look when it shivered from the impact. He just hoped it would live long enough to get them back home, too.

"Let's go look for our client. What was his name again?"

Joining Dante in his stride towards the city, Nero fished a small piece of paper out of the pockets of his coat. Straightening it, he read the scraggly words written out loud.

"*Tōya, Headstudent's office at the Yokohama City University.*"

Stuffing the crinkled note away again, Nero took another look around. They were approaching what looked like the town centre bustling with activity. It looked like some sort of festival was approaching. There were already a couple food and gaming stands praising their services to pedestrians. A big tent to his left was still unfinished, though, and there were a lot of unoccupied spaces that looked like there were even more booths planned.

The citizens looked rather normal, enjoying life just chatting away. Completely contrasting the urgent call they had received at the *Devil May Cry* two days ago, claiming something that could only be a demon was wreaking havoc near the town, something they supposedly couldn't deal with themselves. A statement that now started to raise suspicion within Nero- how could they *not* be able to handle a demon when they had such weaponry at their disposal? Unless it was a really big one, one of the Lords of Hell, but these needed to be summoned manually, they couldn't just poke their heads through any random rift they might stumble across, like lesser devils could. Something was off.

"Hey, Dante...", Nero muttered while shuffling a bit closer to his companion. The elder looked completely at ease, but the young demon hunter knew better than to disregard his relative's guarded gaze.

"I know. Something's fishy about this", Dante agreed in a low voice. That didn't stop him from winking at a young woman wearing a yellow uniform, though. Nero snorted and rolled his eyes. Dante was such a huge flirt.

"The same procedure as every time, then?"

His only answer was a nod and a grin, which Nero amusedly returned. This wouldn't be the first time someone tried to trick them in order to catch them off guard. Especially since he'd joined Dante in the *Devil May Cry* over two years ago had the demons become even more determined and radical in their quest to eradicate the last drops of Sparda's blood. But so far, the two of them had proven to be quite the team. Even Dante, in a rare display of sentimental mush, had admitted fighting demons and doing his job hadn't been that easy and felt that safe in a long time. Words that had made Nero's chest swell with pride and turned his insides into warm, fluttery goo (which he'd deny with his dying breath). All he had said and shown were a cocky grin, a thumb's up and a careful, yet no less genuine "Likewise." But he figured that was enough.

Nero was ripped from his musings when another low whistle, accompanied by an appreciative noise, was heard from his right. He looked up to check which arse Dante was ogling now, when-

"Wow."

- he saw the huge, elaborate building a couple yards away, a large sign saying *Yokohama City University for Enchanters*.

They both paused their steps to take in the very impressive sight in front of them. The building was gigantic, sporting multiple high tower-esqe structures that looked brand new. The façades were still shiny, void of even the slightest speck of dirt. The cleaning staff was either overly motivated or this had something to do with this Enchanter-business advertised on the big sign. Nero wasn't entirely sure what that actually was, but he figured it had something to do with magic.

Patting himself mentally on the shoulder for his razor-sharp deduction skills, he discreetly elbowed Dante in the side to get the other's attention. Icy blue eyes focussed on him. Within less than a second, he knew the older hunter had had the same thoughts plus another one. They both nodded.

"Why would they need our help..."

"... if they have a whole university teaching magic?"

Their initial suspicions reaffirmed, the two part-devils raised their guard before entering the university grounds. The moment they crossed the threshold, both felt a

slight tingle washing over their bodies. Slightly alarmed, they passed an eerily empty entrance hall bigger than their entire *home* before stepping through another door and finding themselves underneath the open sky again. A few paths were leading in a circle around and to the tower in the middle as well as other buildings. A multitude of flowers were planted between the paths, giving the grounds a comfortable atmosphere. This sure was different from the universities back home, which prevailed with concrete-induced cleanness and their impersonal air, screaming *Your child isn't here to have fun, it's here to become a useful member of society!* into any visitor's face. Almost as nice as a flower garden and open air surrounding what appeared to be the cafeteria.

While Dante crouched down to inspect the greenery a little closer, Nero took a few steps towards the tower in the centre. There were tables and chairs not only on the outside but on the inside, too, as well as a young woman behind the counter rummaging through a fridge of some sort. He shot a look back to his older relative who was approaching him.

"These flowers and their beds are new. Can't be older than a couple months. Now, that could be nothing, but I feel like this barrier we passed earlier is more than just a greeting. These flowers are supposed to be here all year around."

Nero was about to ask how he'd figured that out just by looking at a couple pretty petals, but he stopped himself before he could and decided to take another look at them. There were a bunch of different flowers planted with some grass in between. He could see freesias and amaryllis as well as cornflowers, and were those waterlily dahlias over there? He wasn't quite familiar enough with the other greens to name them, but he was pretty sure the few he did know weren't supposed to be in full bloom at the same time. So yeah, here was definitely some magic going on.

So Nero gave his partner merely a nod, which was returned with a small, yet appreciative grin. The wheels in his head turned for another second to make sense of the confusion Dante's reaction had caused. When the answer hit him, he felt awkwardly proud of himself yet also a tiny bit annoyed because of that. He reminded himself of a dog. But putting that aside, Nero really was glad that he was finally able to let some of the customs the order had ingrained in his head go. Instead of ignoring everything irrelevant to the objective and therefore not being able to see the bigger picture as a subordinate, he was beginning to figure things out for himself naturally again. Something Dante had been encouraging him to do from the very beginning—probably also because he had no desire to point everything out all the time, which Nero himself didn't appreciate all that much, either. But still, this process was not one to progress too quickly, and the memory of that left a bitter taste in his mouth. His first solo job after arriving at the *Devil May Cry* being the biggest offender.

"What's wrong?"

Nero forced himself back into the present upon hearing his relative's voice. Just now realising his face must've mirrored his unpleasant thoughts, he quickly shook all memories of this particular case off.

"Nothing, just remembered something. Anyways, how about we ask this girl behind the counter where we can find this Tōya dude?"

Even though he could almost feel the look Dante was shooting him, Nero decided to be stubborn and ignored the inquiring gaze sprinkled with doubt and a tiny note of worry. These were his own demons (pun not intended) and none of Dante's responsibility, just as some things weighing down on the older hunter weren't meant to be carried by Nero's shoulders, not even partly.

After a few seconds of intense silence, Dante finally inclined, tilting his head just the tiniest bit, and agreed.

"Sounds like a plan."

And with that, the two part-devils headed towards the glass entrance to the cafeteria. Upon stepping inside, they were greeted with warm air heavy with the scents of prepared lunch boxes for the students. Nero sniffed. Were there burgers and pizza on the menu...?

"Man, I'm starting to wish I went to school in this place... The school I went to only offered the regular stuff. You know, the disgusting kind."

"I didn't even know you actually went to school...", Nero mumbled in absent response while walking towards the nearest counter in the centre of the circular room. The service girl was now focussed on cleaning some cutlery but looked up with a beautifully fake smile upon hearing him coming closer. The professionalism was soon replaced by confusion, though. One might wonder why.

"Hey. We're looking for a guy named Tōya, or rather his office. Can you give us a pointer or two?"

Her smile returned and she nodded before pointing towards the western exit of the yard.

"Just go through there, it's the second door on the left. Mind if I ask what you want from him? You don't look like you're from around here. We've been having a lot more visitors lately, but I've never seen guys like you. Not even from *Junk City*, and they sure got some oddballs over there."

Oddballs...? Before Nero could open his mouth to answer, feeling slightly insulted, Dante interfered by leaning against the counter and putting a hand on his shoulder.

"We have some business to take care of and this Tōya told us to meet him there."

A charming smile accompanied this statement, causing Nero to roll his eyes. The old man was getting flirtier every day, and Nero was wondering why. Probably midlife-crisis or something.

"I see. He should be there in a couple minutes, lunch break's about to start."

"Thanks."

Before Dante had the chance to say anything else, Nero grabbed the wrist belonging to the hand on his shoulder and steered the older hunter towards the aforementioned exit.

"Hey, I wasn't done wi-"

"You can hit on girls half your age all you want as long as you're not doing it on the job. Geez, what's wrong with you? You've gotten even worse."

That last part shut the elder's mouth up again pretty quickly. His face then went through some interesting transitions. First, there was insult. The reason for that one was obvious. Next was a slightly amusing mixture of embarrassment and discomfort. Probably because Dante himself was realising what he was doing. And in the end, there was defeat. The half-demon grimaced and dragged one gloved hand through his hair, sighing.

"I know what you mean. I'm not even sure why I'm doing this, I just... Urgh, I don't know."

Nero halted in front of the door that was tagged as the Headstudent's Office, finally letting go of the other's wrist. He shot him a weird look. This was... odd. He calculated his words carefully before responding.

"Look. I don't particularly care whether you're doing that or not, but keep it to yourself while we're on the job. And around people my age, because that's kind of creepy", not particularly fond of the idea of ending whatever this was on this kind of note, he added teasingly: "Makes me scared I'll be your next target."

Successfully distracted, Dante snorted.

"You wish."

Not believing for a second that Dante wasn't purposefully letting himself being sidetracked, Nero obliged and they bickered back and forth for the following minutes. One person that looked like they were working here shot them a very strange look upon passing them, but that didn't matter.

A few more minutes went by until a young, dark-haired man appeared through the door to the corridor they were waiting in. He paused his steps upon noticing them, as did Dante and Nero their words upon realising that must be their client. Nero scrutinised the man standing a few feet away from them. He was of average height and had dark blue-ish, short hair. Bright eyes were hidden behind dark-framed glasses and he was wearing what appeared to be a blue-themed uniform. Both part-devils stood straight and went right into professional mode. It was Dante who spoke up.

"You must be Tōya."

The stranger nodded and gazed at them calculatingly.

"You must be the devil hunters I contacted."

Nero merely nodded, his arms crossed, while Dante saluted.

"At your service."

Tōya nodded and picked up his steps. He went and opened the door to his office, motioning them inside before entering. They followed him and Nero took a look around. The office looked rather simple, there weren't many decorations apart from two picture frames on the desk this Tōya was now sitting down behind. There was, however, an ornate spear attached to the wall. It didn't quite look like its only purpose was to improve the atmosphere. He observed Dante closing the door behind him before taking *Rebellion* off his back, leaning it against the plain, but comfortable looking chair in front of the desk. Plopping down on it, Dante wasted no time addressing their client.

"So, tell us about your demon problem."

Nero opted to lean against the wall next to Dante, guard raised, and crossed his arms in front of his chest. He would leave the talking to Dante. Yes, he had gotten better at keeping his temper at bay, but he was still prone to blowing up on clients he felt were trying to bullshit them. Which was definitely the case this time. They weren't only familiar with magic and had advanced weapon technology, but even melee combat. Why would they need any help?

"Actually, we're not sure they're demons."

Nero's gaze shifted to the young man sitting comfortably behind his desk. His eyes were still calculating, regarding both of the hunters in a cool, distanced manner. In any other situation, both part-devils could appreciate such a thing, but alas, they didn't. Not when it looked like they were being tricked. Nero watched silently as Dante shifted his weight and leant forward, elbow resting heavily on the table, his right hand playing with the straps holding his twin guns. Instead of explaining any further, though, Tōya's eyes stayed fixated on the two of them. A heavy silence pressed down on all three of them and the alarm bells in Nero's mind rang even louder. He shifted, ready to draw any of his weapons instantly if necessary.

To their confusion and disappointment, though, Tōya neither attacked nor made any kind of threatening movement. Quite the opposite, actually- he raised his hands in a peaceful manner and wrung out a wry smile.

"I see. You thought my request wasn't genuine and my words just suggested that to be the case."

Nero growled in the back of his throat. This guy was starting to get on his nerves, for some reason he wasn't even quite sure about. He still kept his mouth shut, though,

and stubbornly stared ahead, listening to Dante voicing their both thoughts.

"If you're smart enough to figure that out, why don't you use those brain cells of yours to explain why we'd get that feeling."

Although his voice sounded nonchalant and uncaring, as if they were old mates catching up, it was hard as steel and allowed neither lies nor half-truths. Nero observed them having a short staring-contest, and even if Tōya was the first to speak again, it didn't quite look like a loss.

"I see why you would feel that way. I apologise for that. I realise I should've incorporated more details in my explanation via telephone. Allow me to explain."

Tōya coughed and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, something which Nero found, for some reason, almost infuriating. He felt like this guy was playing with them, subtly mocking them in their assumed paranoia. Dante gestured for the head student to continue, shooting Nero a look that said *Keep it together*.

"First, I must make it clear that this is the first time creatures like this have appeared around here. As you've probably noticed, this city is actually quite capable of protecting itself. However, we are not familiar with these types of enemies, not at all, and our golems-"

"Golems?"

"The automatised machines you have seen outside- are not made to fight enemies like these. Not even I know how to reprogram them to do so. They've been made to fight other golems and humans, if ordered by the human guards, but these creatures that have troubled us for a while now seemingly count as neither."

To Nero, this sounded like a major load of bull. Grinding his teeth, he kept listening.

"Assuming I bought this story- you openly advertise that this is a university that teaches magic. What keeps you from fighting those creatures with that?"

Dante's inquiry, however, was met with a gaze mostly filled with confusion. Nero could feel his patience running thin.

"Magic? No. We're Enchanters. We manipulate Ether, which is mostly efficient against enemies based on Ether-manipulation as well." Tōya shot Dante a weird look, which was the first time he didn't look cool and professional. "Magic doesn't exist anymore."

"Are you fucking *kidding* me?"

Before Nero could stop himself, he marched over to the desk and slammed both his hands on the surface, causing the wood to shiver and creak due to the impact. His blood was boiling. This was getting ridiculous, they were both being insulted by how stupid this guy thought them to be. Magic didn't exist anymore? *Bullshit*.

He was already opening his mouth to unleash a rage-fueled snark-feast upon their so-called client when Dante rose from his seat and placed both of his hands on the younger's shoulders. Carefully steering his temperamental friend a few inches away from Tōya, who was silently watching them mostly unrattled, yet surprisingly curious at something, Dante's grey eyes locked onto his own icy blue ones.

"Don't. Let me handle this. I actually think he's saying the truth."

"Are you stupid? This guy-"

"-is genuine. Trust me on this. We don't know anything about this culture, who says magic hasn't died out around here a long time ago? Use your head, Nero. We both know what we felt was different from magic, albeit similar. Calling this Enchanter-business magic was our own assumption- a false one."

Nero merely snorted in mock-understanding. Even if he knew Dante was right in what he said, he still wasn't willing to back down and pretend like everything was making sense because it didn't. But the light eyes drilling into his own were unwavering, and even if Nero fought it a little, he could feel his anger receding again. He whirled around, turning away, and crossed his arms in front of his chest again. He merely shot Dante a look over his shoulder.

"Fine, whatever."

With a final pat on his shoulder, Dante turned back to Tōya, who was fondling some folders on his desk. He still didn't look perturbed. The red-clad hunter shot his client an easy grin.

"Sorry about that, but we've made some experiences in the past. We're not quite popular in certain places, if you get my drift."

The young man merely nodded. His eyes, however, were still carefully regarding Nero's form. His brows were slightly furrowed in contemplation, but after a few seconds, his gaze shifted to the hunter sitting in front of him again.

"I apologise again for not providing enough information to prevent your cautious approach. I assure you, we're not after either of you. We merely need your help to deal with creatures that appear to fall under your expertise we've been struggling with. A few selected students very proficient with Enchantments, including myself, are able to keep them from entering the city, but we can't put an end to this. That's when I thought of calling for help and your business seemed to be most fitting. My research suggests these creatures are, in fact, of demonic nature, but the few reports I found were old and hence only partly credible." His eyes moved back to Nero, something which Dante noted with a slight hint of both confusion and resurfacing apprehension. Yes, he had told his younger partner to calm down, but that didn't mean he and this Tōya were going to be best buds now. He followed his client's gaze, realising he was focussed on... Nero's right arm. He must've noticed the demonic appendage during his outburst earlier.

He growled on the inside because this definitely wasn't something that could just be waved off- people were scared of this arm, yes, but not interested in it unless they had less than desirable motives. He still didn't believe this job was supposed to be a trap right from the start, but that didn't automatically mean plans couldn't be adjusted. It's happened before. He was glad Nero was more than capable of taking care of himself, but it still left a bitter taste in his mouth and severely pissed him off whenever someone was after the kid. Blame the childhood trauma.

Before Dante could say anything, however, Nero spoke up, his voice sounding strangely strained.

"Dante... my arm's acting up."

Nero slowly turned around, eyes fixated on his tingling *Devil Bringer*. It didn't feel like usual, there was no sign of the normal buzz underneath the scales nor did it glow. Instead, it was like a slight tingle right beneath the thick skin, itching and tickling and causing his fingers to twitch in irritation. He could see Dante rising from his seat and shooting a glare towards their client, who looked both confused as well as uncomfortable. Nero wasn't sure whether the slight hint of worry was his imagination or not, but he was too busy staring at his arm that seemed to heat up now.

Before anyone had the chance to say anything else, though, the door to the office suddenly burst open, wooden door slamming hard into the wall and causing the shelves to shake. Another young man- a student, judging by his red-themed uniform- hastily stumbled into the room, left hand tightly gripping his right wrist.

"Tōya, something's up with my arm! It's all tingly and itchy and feels way too hot-!"

Nero's eyes shot up and he stared at the intruder. His *Devil Bringer* was uncomfortably warm now, and the reason for that had just entered the room. The other young man cut himself off as well upon realising his arm was drawing him to one of the strangers in his best friend's office. For a moment, widened blue eyes met widened green and violet ones. Then, Nero's gaze slowly shifted to the arm the other guy was gripping tightly. Both the glowing lines and the light washing over it in waves were most curious.

Chapter 1 Alt. Version

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After a few seconds of intense silence, Dante finally inclined, tilting his head just the tiniest bit, and agreed.

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And with that, the two part-devils headed towards the glass entrance to the cafeteria. Upon stepping inside, they were greeted with warm air heavy with the scents of prepared lunch boxes for the students. Nero sniffed. Were there burgers and pizza on the menu...?

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"Hey. We're looking for a guy named Tōya, or rather his office. Can you give us a pointer or two?"

Her smile returned and she nodded before pointing towards the western exit of the yard.

"Just go through there, it's the second door on the left. Mind if I ask what you want from him? You don't look like locals. Or, well, we've had some interesting folks popping in from time to time, ever since relations between the cities improved, but you guys look even fancier than those weirdoes from *Junk City*."

Not even bothering to grace that statement with a reply, Nero merely snorted and turned away when Dante took up the torch.

"Yep, we're from a place far *far* away. But as much as I'd love to stay and chat- I'm sure you have *most interesting* things to offer- we have some business to attend to. How about-"

"- you'll excuse us now since we have to get going. Bye."

Deciding he'd let that foolery gone on for long enough, Nero interrupted Dante's attempts at flirting his way into a different kind of serving. Grabbing the older

hunter's elbow, he dragged him outside in the direction of the building the girl had pointed at. Ignoring her waving after them, the young part-devil let out another snort that was only partly exasperated and mostly amused. He realised that his older relative did this most of the time not only because he tried (and failed at) being a ladies' man, but to make people stop questioning them. Nero had been told more than once that he could do that just as nicely, but he rather left that to someone with no repercussions of leaving broken hearts behind- or at least that's what the red-clad hunter liked to pretend happened.

Dante detached himself from the younger's grip, no hard feelings evident in his face or any of his other gestures, and they merrily made their way over to the automated glass door leading to, according to the shiny plaque screwed onto the wall next to it, the administrative offices. After entering, they found themselves in a clean, white hall with more fancy looking doors left and right. Going directly to the one that should lead the two part-demons to their client and finding confirmation in the form of another glass plaque sporting the words *Headstudent's Office*, they stopped in front of it before Dante raised his fist and proceeded to give it two firm knocks. Mere seconds later, a voice could be heard from within.

"You can enter."

Doing just that, Dante and Nero soon found themselves within a moderately spacious office room. Two large windows offered view on the flowery scenery outside.

"Can I help you?"

They turned to the source of the very same voice that had called them in and found themselves looking at a young man in his, presumably, mid-twenties. Sharp, bright blue eyes behind thin-framed glasses were studying the two of them. His short, dark blue hair was complimenting his blue school uniform, oddly enough. Nero wasn't quite sure why, but the guy had something of a strange air around him, something that caused his insides to tingle in the weirdest ways.

Dante, as usual, cut straight to the point.

"You're Tōya?"

The young man inclined his head, his gaze suddenly a lot sharper and attentive than before.

"That I am. You must be from the *Devil May Cry*, then." It wasn't a question.

Deciding to leave the talking to his older partner, Nero turned around to take in some more of his imminent surroundings, even if he kept listening with one ear.

"I'm Dante and that's my partner, Nero. So, tell us about your demon problem."

Arms crossed in front of his chest, his eyes lingered a moment on the ornate spear leaning against the wall next to a file cabinet. His eyes flickered over to their client,

measuring briefly what the man was capable of.

"Can I get you something to drink first?"

"Nah, we're good. So, demons?"

This Tōya seemed perfectly calm- calculating, even. He looked right back at Dante, not showing the slightest hint of fear or even unease at being alone in a room with two very dangerous individuals that were also *very* armed. Nero would be lying if he said that was a first, but it was certainly uncommon. Most people were either losing their shit because of their demon problem or because of them- or both. But not this guy.

"Very well. First, let me clarify that we're not even sure if these creatures are considered demons. They appeared near the city a few weeks ago and have been there ever since."

"Then why call *us*? I usually wouldn't complain about the drive, but two days for a *maybe* sound kind of harsh, don't you think? "

Nero still hadn't turned around and was instead studying the expensive and antique looking chessboard including ornate crystal pieces sitting on a shelf next to the window. This client of theirs couldn't be more of a stereotype if he tried. Well, except for the greatly cared for but obviously often used spear attached to the wall.

"While we're not entirely certain, I have reason to believe these creatures do, in fact, fall under your expertise. I have looked through all the history records I could find and if I recall correctly, there was mention of beings of similar nature dating about thirteen hundred years back. These records also show that all known means of fighting them have been lost to us shortly after, so-

"*Bullshit.*"

Despite his one-worded outburst, Nero still stared intently at the spear hanging on the wall opposite the desk. While it was faint, it caused the same tingle on his insides as the man himself did, and now he had finally put the pieces together of where that tingle came from. Leftover traces of executed magic, albeit faint, and if these people here attended a freaking *university for magic* next to handling real close combat weapons while *also* having some pretty darn heavy armoury running around town- yeah, no. The people here were perfectly capable of protecting themselves.

"You actually believe we're gonna buy this?"

Not bothering to explain himself any further, the young part-devil merely turned around and stared hard at their client. And Tōya stared right back, but his gaze wasn't filled with anger or the like, but rather with a faint hint of surprise peeking through the metaphorical gears grinding in his head. Well. That was a reaction Nero hadn't quite anticipated. But Dante picked up right where he had left, elaborating on their doubts in a much calmer fashion- the look he shot to Nero, however, was one of acknowledgement.

"You know, there are plenty bastards out there who'd just *love* to have a piece of us. Literally. And I have to admit, your story sounds rather fishy. So why don't you explain to us what's really going on?"

Tōya stayed silent for a moment, staring the both of them up and down. Noticing the older male's gaze lingered just a tad too long on the scales on his right arm that weren't entirely hidden, Nero turned around again with a low growl in the back of his throat. After a few more seconds, their client apparently arrived at a conclusion and made an 'ah' sound.

"I think I understand. The two of you are being hunted for being not entirely... *human*, so to speak, and you believe this is some kind of elaborate trap to acquire some sort of power or might the two of you possess. Am I correct?"

"Got it in one. Now, give me one reason why I shouldn't be getting you in one."

Dante's voice may have sounded pleasant enough, but Nero could feel the cold and slightly dangerous aura he emitted. He could practically see the older's hand at the ready to get their client a little more acquainted with *Rebellion* and, just to be sure, he put a hand on the hilt of his *Blue Rose* as well. Instead of mad cackling or demons bursting through the walls, however, they were met with an awkward laugh and raised hands.

"I assure you, I have no plans of the like you seem to think of. I apologise if my call and behaviour made it look that way, but there's no need for this. Neither I nor anyone else is after you."

Nero's eyebrows shot up and he was pretty sure Dante's did, too. Their client actually sounded pretty sincere.

"Would you please explain what gave you the impression this was a ruse? I'm afraid I have to admit I'm not quite sure as to what would make you think so. Otherwise, I would have explained more properly from the beginning to prevent a scene such as this from playing out."

Knowing Dante could be bothered to do just that, Nero occupied himself by skimming over the titles of a variety of books neatly stacked on a large shelf. The tingle in his arm was getting stronger, although it was still faint. And was he imagining things or was it heating up, too? But for what reason?

"Fine, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt for now. First, while demons aren't exactly the hit in high society, most people at least know about them. Otherwise, I wouldn't have a job. Especially in big cities like this since they're drawn to large masses of humans. Second, you guys here don't only know magic, you actually teach it like other universities teach law or medicine. I've also seen you and plenty of other people proficient with hand-to-hand combat. And last, those guys with the big guns out there. I don't know what they are, but judging by their firepower, you guys *really* shouldn't be afraid of a bunch of ickle demons."

There was silence for a moment and Nero could only guess as to its reason. The strange reaction in his arm was getting too strong to wave off or even ignore, and he clenched his right fist tightly. The tingling had gotten too intense for his liking. He threw an irritated look at the offending appendage and realised with a lot of confusion and a small bit of panic that it was starting to glow. He barely heard their client speaking up again, puzzlement colouring his own voice as well.

"It's true that we learn and teach Enchantments at this university, but that's only a small fraction of what real magic can do. That has been lost to us over a millennium ago."

"What?"

Nero didn't even hear what else was being said. His gaze was locked on his *Devil Bringer* and the blue glow it was emitting in waves similar to a heartbeat. Despite himself, Nero felt a small surge of fear rising in his stomach- *this was not normal*. Gripping his scaled wrist with his human hand tightly, he could even feel the heat it was giving off and it was bordering on uncomfortable. Still staring intently at his weirdly acting limb, he raised his voice, too preoccupied with what was happening to even care about the slight hint of panic in his tone.

"Dante, something's wrong with my arm."

Obviously not needing to specify which arm exactly he was talking about, his older relative reacted in an instant. Less than a second later, their client was all but forgotten and Dante stood right next to Nero, hand on his shoulder and unusually serious eyes locked on the phenomenon.

"Anything else?"

"It feels really hot and itchy- I have no fucking clue why, it's never acted like this-"

In the very same moment Dante opened his mouth to retort, the door to the office suddenly burst open, wood slamming hard enough into the wall to leave a crack in the concrete. Three pairs of eyes whipped to the source of the disruption, their client even rising from his seat in shock, surprise and even worry.

Another young man had entered the office. Another student, judging the- for whatever reason red- uniform he was wearing. He seemed to be around Tōya's age and was obviously familiar with their client, but that wasn't what caught everyone's attention. Neither was it his silver hair or the mismatched eyes. It was the arm he was gripping tightly, his right one. Golden lines were visible on the skin, and the pulsating light they were emitting washed over it in waves.

His arm feeling like it was reaching its peak of unusual sensations and reactions, Nero couldn't help but freeze up. Mismatched eyes found his own and icy blue locked with green and purple.

Chapter 2

Nero almost forgot about his own, weirdly behaving arm. *What the hell is going on.*

The other guy was staring at him with an expression that looked very much like how his own felt- dumbfounded, confused and sort of awed- yet also, there was something else. A very strange feeling was rising up inside of him and Nero found himself having trouble looking away from this person.

"Atsuma?"

Tōya's voice ripped through the awkward silence. It was directed at the red-clad student who now tore his gaze away from the younger demon hunter to regard what was presumably his friend.

"I- I'm not sure. I was going to get some lunch, but when I entered the cafeteria- Tōya, I swear, I haven't touched anything, but my arm suddenly- it felt all weird and started to pull me here? I have no idea what's going on, it hasn't acted like this since back when- What's going on? Who are they?" *Who's he?* was the unasked question Nero could sense. The same question was being reflected in his own mind- no, it was more urgent than that. It was ricocheting in his head, bouncing off all ends and corners it could find. He found himself unable to tear his attention away from that still glowing arm.

"They're the demon hunters I mentioned. Atsuma, calm down. I'm sure nothing's wrong, although this is most peculiar... Atsuma, would you mind showing this young man around while I'll explain the details to his partner?"

Nero barely registered Dante interjecting, voicing his doubts concerning this particular idea. The other guy- Atsuma?- also seemed to not be paying attention. His heterochromic eyes were still wide and staring at his *Devil Bringer*.

"Okay, fine then. Nero?"

"Hm? What?"

Mentioned part-devil was forcibly ripped out of his stunned daze when Dante appeared right in front of him. Worry was etched tightly onto his face, but there was also a strange gleam in his eyes. Looking around, he noticed Tōya was regarding Atsuma with the same expression. Nero shifted awkwardly, his eyes still locked onto Atsuma.

"Why don't you guys go out for a while?", Dante asked, yet added quietly: "If you want to. If something happens, I trust you'll take care of yourself? If I feel like you're in trouble, I'll be there in an instant, job or no."

For a brief moment, Nero wanted to snark at Dante for acting like his patron, but

before he could open his mouth, something strange surged within him. Even though he wasn't sure what exactly it was, he spontaneously decided to put his faith into it and go along. So, he nodded.

"Okay."

Dante looked slightly surprised, but that gleam in his eyes shone even brighter for just a split second. Wondering what was up with that, Nero stepped closer to Atsuma who was still carrying a very confused expression. The weird tingle in his demonic arm got even stronger and for some reason, Nero was starting to feel embarrassed.

"Atsuma? Or do you not want to?"

Tōya was speaking to his friend directly, putting a hand on his shoulder. His voice was still calm and quiet, but there was also a previously unheard warmth to it. They were really good friends, apparently. Nero watched silently, feeling slightly awkward, but nevertheless waited patiently. He observed Atsuma when he blinked a few times before looking over to the blue-clad student, appearing flustered and insecure, but also curious.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

The dark-haired male nodded, smiling.

"I know you won't do anything. Go ahead and chat a little, leave this to me."

Atsuma gave a hesitant nod. His mismatched eyes shifted back to Nero, looking rather unsure of himself. The young hunter watched him scratching the back of his head, before finally letting go of his glowing arm to search for the door knob.

"If you say so, Tōya... Uhm, let's get going then?"

Nero nodded before throwing another look over his shoulder to Dante, who was silently regarding the two of them. Not quite sure how he felt about this, Nero followed the student out of the office and the building into the yard. There were a lot more people there now, sitting at the tables, chatting and enjoying their break. Nero curiously noted that while they all wore the same uniform as Atsuma and Tōya did, theirs were dark grey instead of colourful. Deciding against voicing this question out loud, though, Nero silently followed his companion who was walking half a step in front of him. He was either even worse at keeping himself in check emotionally than Nero was or this strange situation was getting to him a lot more, judging the way he was constantly flexing his fingers and fumbling with the hem of his shirt.

"Uhm... I kinda want to ask you some questions, but not around all these people. Do you mind if we go somewhere a little more... secluded?"

Atsuma sounded hesitant, but he threw a nervous smile over his shoulder and stopped his stride. Nero nodded, feeling awkward again. He sort of wanted to ask some questions as well, which made him feel even more awkward. This was not a

situation he had ever thought to find himself in. How the fuck was he supposed to react?

"Okay then. Uh, just follow me. It's not far."

Resuming their steps, Atsuma led them past the multitude of students enjoying their lunch break towards the northern building. He was still flexing the fingers of his right hand, so his arm, which was still glowing faintly, was most likely still feeling weird, as was Nero's. They finally reached a corner of the yard that was partly hidden by some tall greenery. While Atsuma was sitting down on a window sill behind a small bench, Nero studied the white, star-shaped petals with mild curiosity. These didn't look familiar. And no, he wasn't looking at them because he didn't know what to say, not at all.

He was forced, however, to pay attention to his companion when said companion cleared his throat.

"So, um... I don't really know how to start, but... I'm Atsuma. As you've probably figured out earlier."

Nero only nodded. "I'm Nero."

And thus, silence resumed. Nero was beginning to think it hadn't been such a smart idea to give in to his impulsive reaction after all. He was now avoiding looking at his companion directly and while letting his eyes wander, he noticed there was an ornate symbol on one of Atsuma's black gloves. The right one. That couldn't be a coincidence, right? But before he could focus on this particular thing, purposely ignoring the insecure yet curious eyes watching him, he was addressed once more. And with a question he had not quite expected like that.

"So... what about your arm?"

Nero stared at the- presumably- older man. Well, that was direct. Bad thing was, though, he wasn't quite sure how to answer that. *A demon bit me and then it grew scales and became all glow-y?* Before he could find a solution to his inner dilemma, though, his confused and hesitant thoughts were halted once again.

"No, wait, this doesn't work like that... Aaargh", Atsuma forcefully scratched the back of his head. Then he was silent for a few seconds before finally letting out a long sigh.

"How about we just pretend the stuff earlier didn't happen?" And with this, he got off the window sill, walked over and held out his left hand.

"I'm Atsuma. I have a weird right arm that glows and absorbs stuff when I touch it."

Nero needed a moment to process this very... upfront introduction. But considering the sheer absurdity of this entire situation, he decided to just go with it. He took the hand with his own human one.

"I'm Nero. I have a weird right arm that glows and absorbs stuff as well."

The part-devil felt a grin creeping onto his face which was returned by the older man. Finally feeling the awkwardness subsiding at least a little, they both plopped down on the bench.

"So, you wanna start?"

Nero shot a long look at his right hand- the only part of his demonic appendage that was visible. After short contemplation, he let out a brief, but deep sigh and rolled his sleeve up. He could feel Atsuma watching him and upon catching the curiosity in the other's mismatched eyes, he started to explain, flexing his scaled fingers. They were still tingling.

"There isn't all that much to say, actually. I was working for an order to fight demons a couple years ago and during one mission, a demon bit me. The injury was weird from the beginning- it hurt a lot less than it was supposed to, judging the way it looked- but I didn't really pay attention to it. I just kept fighting with my left hand. But after a couple days, I noticed my skin was... kinda changing. It didn't just go poof- *hey, I've got scales!* My skin just... changed, I can't really explain. I tried hiding it for a while and it worked, even though Ky- some people were worried because I was bandaging it for such a long time and didn't let anyone else take a look at it. That was about four years ago."

Nero ended his short recap. He shot a brief look to his companion who was watching him carefully. After a moment of silence, Atsuma gave him a wry smile.

"I see. That must've been hard... when it just changes like that, without having any idea about the 'why'. What did your friends say?"

The hunter shook his head, ignoring the picture of a young woman with kind, brown eyes and her stern, but loyal older brother that flashed before his inner eye.

"I didn't really have a lot of friends. One died shortly after I was forced to reveal it and the other... well", Nero let out a short laugh, "she basically called me an idiot for hiding it from her."

Atsuma grinned back, but there were more things he wanted to know.

"And your parents?"

"I'm an orphan. I never met them."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Nero shook his head, "Nah, it's fine. It's not like you can miss something that was never there."

"Hmmm..."

Feeling like the other wasn't quite agreeing with him on that, the part-devil was about to elaborate, but another question interrupted him before he could open his mouth to do so.

"And the other guy that was with you? Who is he?"

Well, that was a query complicated to answer. Nero stayed silent for a moment, trying to think of a way to explain his relationship with Dante.

"That's... actually kinda difficult to answer."

"Huh?"

"Well, you see... all we know is that we're related? Somehow?"

Atsuma's confused look wasn't exactly subsiding, so Nero decided to go for the long explanation.

He included all relevant events that had happened in *Fortuna* a few years ago. His companion was listening intently, not interrupting a single time which he couldn't help but feel being something slightly unusual. After he was done dumping some exposition on his newly acquired acquaintance, there was a brief bout of silence. Nero himself just let all the events from the past flow through his head, just reminiscing about all the things that had changed since then. Atsuma, however, seemed to be thinking intently, judging by his creased brows and the slightly far-away look. Then he spoke up.

"So if I got this right... You're part demon and this Dante is, too, and you share some blood through his father, but neither of you know where exactly you come from? Or rather... Who?"

Nero nodded once. "That's about the gist of it, yeah."

"I see... Have you ever tried to find out?"

The young part-devil took a moment before answering while shaking his head. "No. I... We're both kind of used to being alone, family-wise, or we were. It kind of just matters to us that we're related, the 'how' doesn't. Actually, since he sorta *could* be my father, we don't even *want* to know. That would've made thing awkward as hell, for both of us, so we just decided to not dig any deeper than absolutely necessary."

Atsuma hummed, arms cross, and seemed to mull things over for a moment. Then, he finally nodded with a small smile.

"I see. I'm just glad you found someone."

For a brief moment, Nero dreaded to end up the awkward mess he usually did when talking about such topics, but to his immense surprise, he just found himself nodding

his thanks. And to his even bigger surprise, he was *smiling*. Apparently there was something about this Atsuma that made him unexpectedly comfortable to be around.

After a short bout of silence, Nero's gaze settled on his demonic arm. The tingling was almost entirely gone, as were the heat and the glow. Instead, there was some sort of... pleasant hum beneath the scales? It felt kind of good, actually. Something he couldn't exactly declare as common or usual, but it mentally got his personal stamp of approval nonetheless. The reason for this feeling was only secondary, too- just knowing that his *Devil Bringer* was capable of being something other than a major pain (or a weapon to punch things really hard) was an epiphany in itself. Figure that.

His eyes were then drawn to Atsuma's arm. Unlike his own supernatural appendage, it looked perfectly human without the glowing lines. *I guess his is back to normal*, too, he mused. The student seemed to have caught his gaze, judging by how he looked at it now himself and begun flexing his fingers.

"You want me to tell you about mine?"

"Yeah, actually."

Atsuma took a deep breath. His mismatched eyes shifted to stare into the clear, blue summer sky above them, a slightly forlorn look on his face, accompanied by a somewhat wistful smile. Seemed like these memories weren't exactly pleasant. But then again, most of Nero's own weren't, either, at least not when it came to his *Devil Bringer*.

"I'm not the best story-teller and I'll probably forget a thing or two, but... Yeah. Well, it was about four years ago, when I was 20. My arm was always odd and it didn't exactly make me the most popular guy around. You know, we learn Enchantment at this school and that's kinda like... manipulating Ether. I'm not sure how it works even though Tōya explained it to me, it's kind of complicated and I'm more the practical type, but well. My arm... hm, we thought he negated Enchantments? Made me wonder more than once why they accepted me into the university to begin with- I wasn't allowed to go to certain places or attend certain classes because of that. But anyway. Back then, things started to go really downhill when my arm... sort of made me undo the seal on a devil golem called *Queen of Ice*- devil golems are like, super, *super* strong. During the Golem War thousand years ago, two of them fighting each other levelled entire cities and, well... They sort of need a magicore to operate, though, but a person with... blood of the ancients, I think?- can also become one. That's what happened to Tōya back then... I wanted to save him and Yokohama, too, because upon her revival, the *Queen of Ice* encased the entire town in ice and its residents... I felt so bad about it, I just *had* to do something.

I met some other people willing to help me- Karin, Raiga-san, Yuki and even Sayaka. We found some more devil golems, like the *Emperor of Fire* and the *Lord of Earth*. More cities were damaged and Karin's father- the king of *London City*- even died. We were searching for a way for me to control my arm, because as it were, it just forced me to do whatever it wanted... It even made me lose my mind during an experiment and I killed hundreds of people... But I didn't know that until Kō-sensei, my teacher here at the university- who admitted that he only allowed me to attend because he

was interested in my arm and my properties as a... weapon- reminded me.

Anyways, fast forward and we met the Sage. She's supposed to be really old, but she doesn't look like it. She told me that it was *her* who attached this arm to me when I was a baby. She told us she found me outside her tower, abandoned and dying, and this was the only way she could think of to save me. She also revealed that..."

This was the first time Atsuma interrupted his explanation. Nero had been listening intently, feeling a certain amount of horror creeping up inside his chest as he pictured what his new acquaintance must've gone through. At least he hadn't *killed* innocents with his *Devil Bringer*... Observing the older male silently, the part-demon took note of how detached Atsuma looked at this moment. But even if he apparently needed a moment to collect himself, it didn't sound as if his past was dragging him down all that much. How odd. After heaving a sigh, the student continued.

"She revealed that my arm was made from another devil golem. His name was *Infinity* and he was kind of the... ruler? Source? of all other devil golems. That's why I was able to suppress them, at least to a degree. And to revive them. Well... Nothing much happened after that. I was still dead-set on saving Tōya, so I just pushed all those thoughts away, thanks to my friends' help, and did what I had to do. We defeated both the *Queen of Ice* and *Infinity*. Tōya was back. We rebuilt the towns that were destroyed as well as the University. We just got done with that last year. My arm's been silent ever since then until... well. Now."

Nero watched the red-clad student scratching the back of his head sheepishly, a slightly crooked grin etched onto his face. He cast a thoughtful look at his inhuman arm, mulling it over.

"I have no idea why, though. It's never acted like *that* and much less so if it didn't involve another devil golem. I mean, you really don't feel like one, but even then, today was... Different. Not this commanding pull like back then or the pain, but rather-"

"- being drawn like iron to a magnet?", Nero chimed in. His own eyes were locked on his unnatural appendage as well. He couldn't deny that today's reaction had certainly been... *unusual*, to say the least. Especially since this weird stuff wasn't happening anymore. Of course, he'd also gotten used to Dante's and Trish's presence, otherwise he'd constantly look like a lighthouse, but that had actually taken some time. Not to mention that he didn't even have the faintest idea of how that even worked, either. Not that he was complaining- he rather appreciated not being blinded by his own arm on a regular base just because Trish decided to drop by.

He could see Atsuma nodding next to him and Nero turned his eyes towards the clear, blue sky. The last remains of their initial awkwardness seemed to finally fade entirely. Instead, they seemed to be replaced by... solace. This guy had had a life eerily similar to his own, although it had been harder at certain points. It made Nero feel... a little bit better about his own situation, he admitted to himself. He wasn't ashamed because of that- he knew full well he was neither the nicest nor the kindest person around. From what little glimpses he had gotten of his new acquaintance, those

features described him a lot better than Nero himself. Which, in turn, made him growl a little for reasons he couldn't quite name.

"Why do you hide your arm?"

The sudden question ripped the young devil hunter out of his musings and his gaze snapped over to the student, whose mismatched eyes were locked on his *Devil Bringer*. He followed their trail to his scaled, right arm.

"I mean, you'd obviously rather have the sleeve rolled up, just like me. And this Dante really doesn't sound as if he'd be bothered by it. So why do you keep hiding it?"

Nero clenched his jaw. Well, this conversation had taken a rather abrupt and certainly not appreciated turn. The answer was obvious, was it not?

"Dante may be used to it, but no one else is. Even your friend Tōya seemed pretty interested."

He tried saying this in a neutral tone, he really did. He was sure, however, that this endeavour hadn't been all that successful, but to his surprise, Atsuma didn't react to his slightly snapped retort at all.

"Don't mind him. He's interested in everything and their dog, to be honest. If it weren't for Makoto and me, I'm pretty sure he'd lock himself up in the library, never to be seen again. And... I guess part of this interest is because of me. We've known each other forever. His parents basically took me in when I was a child, so I guess seeing someone else in a similar situation as I... Well. We *are* here now, aren't we? Because he prompted us?"

That was true. But Nero could still feel his temper flaring slightly, even if he tried to suppress it.

"He's my best friend, you know. He would never do something to hurt me, not after..." Atsuma trailed off. Nero felt his temper subsiding, being replaced by curiosity. He figured it had something to do with that big adventure Atsuma had told him about. But he'd made it sound as if Tōya had unwillingly become this ice golem's core, whatever it was called. Before he could voice his confusion, however, did the student next to him continue.

"Anyways. I can promise he didn't do it because he had something against you but rather because he was thinking of me. You know... it may look as though things are all nice and fine now, but they weren't for the longest time. And even today, after everything that's happened, there are there still some people that don't like me because of my arm."

Well, that was certainly something Nero could relate to. Maybe not those lunatics in *Fortuna*, but plenty of their clients were still afraid of him even after he'd just risked his hide to save them. Ungrateful arseholes... One might've figured he was getting used to this fact- and he was, actually, but that didn't exactly mean it was particularly

pleasant.

"But that doesn't matter anymore. I know it takes some time to really get that into your head, but... All those other people? They don't matter."

Nero's eyes narrowed as he stared at the young man next to him. Those mismatched eyes, however, were calm.

"I know this sounds stupid and I know I'm not the smartest person around. I'm not sure if this is good advice or not. Who knows, maybe this is incredibly dumb and I'll burn in hell for dragging you into this. But really, it helps. It helped me a lot. It always weighed me down when I heard people talking about me behind my back. It was even worse when they also talked about Tōya. He's always been really popular, you know. Good-looking, smart, nice... He even had his own fanclub and I guess they wanted me to be gone. They didn't understand why he was even bothering with me. Truth be told... I didn't for a long time, either. I mean, sure, we were childhood friends, but it's not like those never break apart. We are so different..."

He trailed off, but after a brief moment, the red-clad young man picked himself up again, looking straight into Nero's blue eyes.

"But if there's one thing I learnt from all that, it's this: I was overthinking things. As ridiculous as that may sound coming from me, but I did. Tōya's told me time and time again that I shouldn't listen to what those other people were saying. They didn't know me and those that did, stick with me. Like Raiga-san and Yuki, and even Karin and Makoto. You have people like that, too, don't you?"

Nero nodded, feeling strangely strained. Yeah, this *was* much easier said than done. He knew how people reacted to his arm, he'd fucking *lived through* it. It couldn't be good for business if he caused potential clients to run away screaming bloody murder on sight of him.

"There you have it." Atsuma nodded as well, a small smile playing about his lips. Sympathy- *not pity*- was shining lightly in his heterochromic eyes. He carefully put a gloved hand on Nero's shoulder- causing the younger male to tense slightly.

"Really, *I know* it's hard, but you'll feel much better if you do."

"That's easy for you to say. At least your arm *looks* human."

"That's true, I guess..." Atsuma conceded, tilting his head to carefully observe said arm. "But yours doesn't absorb things left and right, does it? We're surrounded by Ether and Enchantments. I could bring down the entire university with one touch if I'm not careful. Or if I wanted to."

Nero stayed silent at that. While it may be true that he'd been wondering, once, whether he'd suddenly find himself- or rather, his arm- eating the coffee machine one morning, it hadn't happened. His *Devil Bringer* only reacted to artefacts-or body parts-of demonic nature. And not even all of them.

"Just... Think about it. Okay? This may sound presumptuous, but... You kind of remind me of myself, a few years ago. So just... Trust your friends and your- Dante. When they haven't done so before, they won't leave you hanging now. And that's all you need, really. You can't stop people from looking, but you can keep yourself from caring. These people don't know who you are, so why even bother? You can't make everyone like you."

"As if I *wanted* everyone to like me", Nero snorted, but then he continued in a much more even voice. "I guess you're right about that. I... I'll think about it."

And just like that, he was met with a blindingly bright grin and another, slightly harder clap on his shoulder.

"That's a great start! I don't know about you, but all this talking made me really hungry, I could eat a horse. How about we grab something to eat before we join Tōya and your friend? You guys are here for those things outside town, aren't you?"

"What are you- oh. Right. Yeah, we are."

Feeling slightly flustered about having forgotten the actual reason for their visit, Nero scratched the side of his nose. *Wow, I must've gotten even more comfortable than I thought...* shot through his head as Atsuma got to his feet, offering a hand to help Nero off the bench. Said part-devil accepted it after a split second of hesitation, letting himself be pulled up into a standing position. The two of them looked at each other for a moment, a grin with a hint of a smile gracing Atsuma's face. Nero couldn't help himself and let the same expression overtake his own features. The older student clapped him lightly on the back, resting his hand on his shoulder blade, and ushered him towards the cafeteria in the centre of the yard. And this time, Nero couldn't find it in himself to object, even if he rolled his right sleeve down again.

Chapter 3

After having enjoyed a delightfully unhealthy lunch at one of the tables in the cafeteria, Nero and Atsuma made their way back to Tōya's office. The awkwardness from earlier seemed to have dissipated entirely by now and thus, they were engaging in joyful, light-hearted chatter when the two people they were seeking out appeared in the doorway across.

Nero looked up with a grin etched onto his face when he noticed Dante approaching them. It was replaced by a scowl, however, when he saw the slightly smug and patronising look on his older relative's mug. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and stopped his stride, forcing Dante to cross the last metres between them in order to clap him heavily on the back.

"I take it things went well and you made a new friend?"

"Fuck you."

Eloquent as ever, Nero brushed the hand and words off with an additional shrug. He couldn't, however, stop the faint blush spreading across his cheeks. It's not like it wasn't *true*... He could hear Dante laughing under his breath and Nero felt compelled to stick out his tongue, but he could stop himself from indulging his desire to react childishly to the situation. The other hunter patted him on the shoulder once more as Nero's eyes wandered over to Atsuma and Tōya, who seemed to be having their own silent conversation of a similar nature.

"Seriously though. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Nothing happened." Dante nodded his approval, but unwilling to let him inquire any further, Nero asked a question of his own in turn.

"So, what about those demons?"

Ignoring the look his older relative bestowed upon him, he stubbornly stared back, one eyebrow raised in finality. They probably would talk about this, but not now. Nero wanted to keep this to himself a little longer.

"Actually, we decided to go pick you guys up and go take care of them now. Those things do sound like demons alright, but they appear to be a special breed. They're a pretty curious bunch, actually. Those golems you can see around town? They apparently look like them-"

"Are you ready to go? Atsuma and I will accompany you. We have some experience fighting those creatures so I am sure we can offer valuable help", Tōya interrupted and both their heads turned to look at the blue-clad student. Nero shrugged and turned towards the door leading to the entrance hall and therefore, the exit. Dante next to him nodded.

"Sure. Lead the way", he said amicably, words accompanied by a sweeping gesture of his hand. The two students passed the devil hunters. Nero observed them, catching the small smiles they were sending his way, one a little bit goofy and the other eerily calm. When they arrived at the door, the two part-demons started to follow.

Nero let himself be filled in on everything Dante and Tōya had discussed while he had been with Atsuma. Apparently, those demons looked like some of these golems that were running around town and the reason those defence units weren't attacking was due to their very peculiar programming. Set to only attack hostile golems on sight, they wouldn't turn on humans without being told to, but those creatures were neither golem nor human, so all the dispatched golems ever did was their best impression of decorative statues. Which was, admittedly, very convincing but not very useful. Dante himself wasn't entirely sure how that worked, but it sounded reasonable enough to the two of them. This wouldn't be the first case of ancient technology posing as a book with seven seals to modern people.

They passed through the town centre again, where even more stalls seemed to have been put up during their time at the university. Atsuma, appearing very excited, suddenly discovered his inner tourist guide and information started bubbling out of him, accompanied by the occasional, much less hyper comment from his opposite friend.

"The Yokohama festival is coming up, that's why they're putting up all those stands! It's super awesome, there're food and games and golem exhibitions, but the best part by far are the golem battles! You need a golem of your own to participate, but then you can fight teams and place bets and win money! Too bad Yuki's not here, she'd love it. Last time she participated, things kinda went downhill really fast." His voice took a slightly more sombre tone towards the end of his expository outburst, but his exuberant grin faltered for only a second. Tōya shot him an amused, but kind smile before going off his own tangent of the festival's history and other according trivia. Dante and Nero shared a look, both entertained but also slightly confused. Not quite remembering having ever asked for any of this information, Nero found himself oddly curious, still. Unwilling to put a name on the reason for that, namely his interest in things concerning his new friend, he simply opted to listen. Dante, usually not the type to go off on town tours, apparently decided to humour him as Tōya did with Atsuma and simply let the two locals rattle off about this building and that tree.

Sooner rather than later, though, the four found themselves at the border of the city. Passing the guards, Tōya declared that the demons' hideout was about thirty minutes by foot from there and they started their trek through the peaceful environment. Nero could feel even Dante being somewhat appreciative of the sheer nature surrounding this obviously advanced town. It was a long shot from where Dante had been living for most of his life, which was speckled with asphalt street and concrete buildings as far as eyes reach. Nero himself was a lot more used to this, having been born and raised in the much more rural town of *Fortuna*. But the forest surrounding his own hometown was a lot... wilder. Aggressive, even. Entirely unlike the idyllic picture of green grass adorned by trees, bushes and the occasional summer flower sprouting from the ground, interrupted only by a stream flowing in gentle waves and the paved path leading to other cities.

The excitement from earlier waned and made space for solemn peacefulness sprinkled with anxious anticipation. Even Nero felt unusually restless- normally, the prospect of being about to fight a bunch of demons either excited or angered him, but this time was different. They had very little information to go on and the bits and pieces they did know weren't exactly reassuring, either.

After a lengthy trek through the knee-high grass, the two students that were leading them while quietly talking to each other came to a halt. Tōya raised his hand to stop the demon hunters as well and he turned his head to address them as he was brandishing his spear.

"Their hideout is at the foot of the mountains over there- but some strays might be closer. Atsuma and I took care of some daring to venture too close to the city just yesterday so they won't be too far out now, but better safe than sorry."
Nero shook his head as he was glancing at his silent and definitely not glowing *Devil Bringer*.

"Nah, they aren't nearby. This thing would glow if they were. I guess they're staying in their cave after the thrashing you two gave some of their buddies."

Both the students' gazes fell onto his demonic appendage and Nero fought the urge to hide it in his coat. Taking Atsuma's words to heart, he was going to try and stop keeping his arm's existence a secret. At least around those he knew wouldn't burn him at the stake for it.

Both pairs of eyes regarding his scaled hand were curious, though one had more of a child-like quality while the other felt calculating. After a brief moment of silence, Tōya put his spear back onto his back and nodded.

"I see. That arm of yours seems to have more uses than searching out similarly unusual limbs."

"Yeah, you could say that..."

Nero looked to the side, uncomfortably scratching the back of his head while his new acquaintance scowled at the other student.

"Tōya, don't be like that", he scolded, crossing his own arms in front of his chest.

To both Dante and Nero's surprise, the only dark-haired male in their little group laughed and raised his hands in an appeasing manner.

"Alright, Atsuma, sorry about that. I apologise, Nero."

"It's fine. Not like I'm not used to it."

Feeling oddly like *pouting*, the youngest of the group motioned for them to continue. Dante, having observed this little exchange silently, closed in on him and nudged his

shoulder.

"Mind filling me in later?"

"Yeah, sure."

Ignoring the contemplative look his older relative was regarding him with, Nero picked up his pace. He wanted to fight some demons- partly also because he was curious about the two enchanters and what they could do. He wondered if Atsuma was going to use that arm of his and if it was in any way similar to his own.

After a few minutes, Nero could feel his *Devil Bringer* reacting to the presence of demons. It started glowing faintly, the light steadily growing brighter as they got closer. Informing the others of his demon detector's status, they brandished their weapons before proceeding with caution.

They could hear growling and beastly shrieks soon thereafter. The first creatures started swarming them, cautious, but definitely out for blood. The four took out their weapons, getting ready, and Nero curiously noted that Atsuma was doing little more than adjusting his gloves. Was he going to fight demons with his *fists*? Okay, sure, he had that arm of his, same as Nero had his own peculiar voodoo-spirit thing coming out of his to help him smash demon skulls, but he was part devil himself. Even Dante usually preferred equipping gauntlets before getting personal with any of them.

The group stepped onto a lightly clearer area where the grass wasn't as high and therefore not as obscuring for their vision when Nero briefly faltered in his preparations. *These* were the demons? They sure as hell looked nothing like the creatures he'd ever encountered before and judging the slightly bewildered look Dante was shooting their opponents, he hadn't, either. Some of them actually looked more like cute dolls rather than bloodthirsty beasts, like that little green animal thing over there... which was baring its rather impressive teeth at them while emitting grotesquely adorable squeals. Others looked like they were straight out of a horror story- especially this huge blob-thing with multiple, madly flailing snake-like heads that were slobbering froth all over the place.

"... This is going to be interesting", Dante commented next to him. "So, Tōya, you said they're exactly like your golems? Any useful info on them?"

Tōya, who was eyeing them mildly interested, gave a curt nod. "Almost all golems have elemental properties. I assume you aren't prepared for that, but Atsuma and I cover fire and water. These creatures lack the very telling core material these golems normally have, but their colour-scheme usually makes it rather obvious as well."

"So we're going to leave things that look fire and water to you while taking care of the rest?"

"That would be the smartest approach, yes. As soon as we've picked these out, we will join you against the others."

"Sounds good enough to me. Let's do this."

As if on cue, some of the demons dashed forward in an attempt to sink their considerable teeth and claws into them. Nero dived to the side, eyes automatically drawn to Atsuma who was merely stabilising his footing and pulling his fist back. Upon landing in a crouch on the floor, *Blue Rose* drawn and aimed, Atsuma's fist connected with the ground and the *earth shook*. The young part-devil could barely keep himself from gaping, shooting at the incoming demons entirely out of reflex. The creatures weren't as lucky- many of them had lost their balance and fallen over each other.

Only to have huge balls of water dropped onto them, drenching the lot and even causing some of them to simply fall apart in an instant, courtesy of Tōya, who had some magical patterns in blue drawn in the air above him. Nero and Dante shared a look- impressed, but also feeling more than a bit fired up. Having capable fighters with them was a nice change, but they sure as hell weren't going to have themselves be shown up.

Focussing on another part of the horde approaching them, Nero revved his *Red Queen* and dashed forward right into the fray, his sword connecting with a satisfying amount of flesh. Shrieks and screams erupted around him as a downpour of blood covered the demons he had missed. Good. If they bled like normal demons, they could be killed like normal demons, too.

Baring his teeth, the young hunter began to hack away at the mass surrounding him. He could hear someone shouting something, but before he had the chance to even attempt to sort out the meaning, he was distracted by one of those huge blob-thingies with too many heads and even more teeth dropping a big ball of frothing spit right where he had been standing a split second ago before roaring directly into his face. With a grimace, Nero didn't even waste a single thought at the fact that he looked like he just came out of a wind tunnel and instead fired up the engine on his *Red Queen*, dashing around the monstrosity to try and slash its side.

To his immense surprise, the skin didn't give away under his sword and he almost lost his balance when the blade simply slipped off what turned out to be a very hard shell. Stumbling a little to catch his balance, he did an awkward twist that almost looked like dancing to dodge an incoming barrage of sword and axe slashes aiming for his head before using his movement's momentum to punch one of the demons so hard in the face, it flew straight back into its brethren, knocking them away and giving him some air to try and deal with this snake-snail-thing. Briefly wondering *which fucking idiot even thought of designing a golem like this*, he rushed around the demon to check whether its back seemed vulnerable- or anything that wasn't as close to its multiple fangs as its belly. But alas, Lady Luck didn't favour him this time and Nero growled in displeasure. This was going to be a bitch.

Momentarily contemplating whether he should just stall for time and wait until one of the others could provide some backup, he idly hacked some small girls carrying flowers with very sharp looking edges around to pieces. Looking at them and then this other beast, the entire situation he found himself in started feeling more and more absurd by the minute. Where the hell did these things even *come* from? Thankfully, the snail-snake didn't seem to be very mobile so Nero could almost safely take care of

the other creatures nearby while evading the teeth that were trying to rip his entire arm off. However, a shadow was suddenly cast over him, causing him to look up. Four or five griffon-like beasts were descending onto him, talons and claws bared to tear him a new one. Quickly rolling to the side, he grabbed a long, thin sword a female looking knight had dropped upon its death and hurled it at his attackers. It pierced through the first one, the force behind the throw strong enough to slam it into the two behind, causing them all to tumble down onto the ground in a rain of blood.

Feeling some drops splattering onto him, Nero quickly shook his head to keep both his hair and the liquid out of his eyes before brandishing *Red Queen*, sharp edge directed at the last griffon. Pushing off the ground, he jumped high into the air, dragging his sword after him in an arc and felt with satisfaction how it cleanly sliced his enemy open. With a deafening shriek, the beast died and Nero landed back on the ground, followed by guts covering him from above.

"Great", he mumbled and shook himself violently to get rid of the disgusting mess hanging off him. This briefly caused him to- not exactly *forget* about the snail-snake, but it was enough to make him miss one of its heads coming close enough to lunge at his shoulder which was covered by something that looked like a liver. Just barely noticing the movement behind him, Nero whirled around, sword raised to intercept the razor-sharp teeth aiming for him, but it was not *Red Queen* that connected.

It was a big, knight-like demon wearing a very sturdy, but also horribly misshapen, looking armour that suddenly came flying from the right, smashing right into the snake-head and *tearing it off* before its teeth, as long and thick as his , could touch either the metal of his sword or the flesh in his shoulder. Not even hearing the ear-piercing scream the creature omitted, the young hunter's head whipped to the side. Atsuma was standing there, right fist still raised from when he had punched the knight straight into the snake-snail-thing. Nero stared for a whole three seconds in which Atsuma winked at him before turning around to smash his fist not *into* another of those knights, but directly *through* its armour and ribcage, causing it to disintegrate on the spot.

Tearing himself away from the unreal scenario unravelling in front of him (*Does it look like this when Dante and I are at work, too? Man, no wonder people are scared of us...*), Nero returned both his attention and the blade of his sword to the remaining demons around him. Stabbing one of them through the chest before revving up his *Red Queen*, causing the shrieking beast to burst into flames, he lifted it into the air and threw it into a group of other creatures that were slowly approaching him. The snake-snail-thing was beginning to calm down again, although its violent twitching and piercing shrieks suggested it was still in a lot of pain- understandably. It turned its remaining heads into his direction and levelled a burning gaze at Nero that promised a very slow and equally agonising death, foamy saliva dripping out of its mouths in long, thick strings. He watched as it started in his direction, faster than before. Funny what anger could do to someone- or something.

The young hunter eyed it, fumbling for his revolver in its holster at his side.

"I guess you still want a piece of me? I'm not sure that's going to be healthy, you know. It's cost you one head already, I'd reconsider if I were you", he informed it

nonchalantly, waving one scaled finger at it.

Pulling his *Blue Rose* out of the leather- along with a squishy, brownish-green spleen that landed on the ground with a disgustingly wet *smack* that caused him to grimace- he gripped his sword tightly and carefully closed in on the multi-headed beast. Aiming with his revolver for the soft-looking flesh at its belly, he zigzagged around, dashing in and out of its range, evading its dangerous teeth that were aggressively aiming for his body parts. He was trying to get close enough to get a hit or two in, but to no avail. However, it neither felt nor looked as though his bullets were leaving any kind of relevant impact- if anything, they only seemed to make it even angrier, as if they were mere flies. He growled in frustration, his blood rising, and was about to throw all caution far into the wind when suddenly flames shot past him, hitting the creature's shelled side. Although no marks could be seen, he could hear it hissing out of multiple mouths, smoke rising from the spot where the fire had connected. Nero shot a brief look behind him and saw Atsuma approaching, looking grimly and also slightly puzzled at the monstrosity.

He was more than a little filthy, soot and dirt covering him from head to toe. One of his sleeves was missing almost entirely and Nero could see an angry, red line on his thigh, still trickling some blood into his battered trousers. Nero was sure, though, that he didn't look any better. Worse, probably, thanks to the shower of blood and guts he'd brought upon himself earlier. Deciding he'd had enough, he started channelling his energy into his *Blue Rose*- these shots had hurt *every* enemy in the past and he'd twice be damned to hell and back if this thing shrugged those off as well. Bringing up his *Devil Bringer* to soften the recoil, he pulled the trigger and noted with satisfaction that the beast was at least flinching from those shots. Atsuma next to him nodded before readjusting his dirtied gloves and rushing straight into the beast's range. It was most likely only due to it still being distracted by his earlier attack that the red-clad student got close enough to deliver a hard and flaming punch to the beast's soft belly. It flinched back violently so that hit must have hurt, but its heads were already snapping at Atsuma who dashed to the side to avoid them. Figuring that playing tag would be the smartest approach in taking this monstrosity down, Nero instantly used that new opening to rush forward, glowing *Red Queen* in hand. He forcefully pushed off the ground, propelling himself high into the air when he saw it smashing onto the ground with one of its heads- which turned out to be a good decision when he could see the earth shaking and Atsuma briefly losing his balance. The beast tried to go for him, but Nero was faster.

With a mighty swing downward and a shout, he landed on the ground hard, his sword cutting through three necks at once. The moment the creature started wailing and thrashing, black blood spilt out of the severed and burnt stumps, slicking the ground. Nero jumped back again to avoid being hit by it, but Atsuma was there in an instant. His fists were already surrounded by intricate patterns similar to the ones Tōya had drawn into the air at the beginning of their battle, but this time, they were red and orange instead of white and blue. His older friend landed a barrage of heavy punches on the demon's soft belly, flames bursting forth every time they connected and the creature's screeches were getting weaker, its movements slower. Fuelled by the prospect of this fight being over soon, Nero raised his *Devil Bringer* for one final attack. Propelling himself forward, he drew his scaled arm back, its spectral version

appearing above. It met its goal with a crunch that was both satisfying and disgusting at the same time, but the beast let out one last, deafeningly high-pitched shriek and then started to melt, leaving only greenish-black goo in its wake. Nero took a quick step back, banishing his spectral arm with a thought, and wrinkled his nose.

"This is just *so gross*."

Atsuma, who'd been closer to the dying beast, had leapt back and evaded the worst of the still bubbling mass that was slowly forming a huge puddle on the ground, but some drops had hit him. Pulling a face, he made a noise of confirmation before shaking himself like a dog that just got out of the water to get rid of the mess. Nero covered his face to protect it from friendly fire and was about to snark at his newest friend whether he could *please* not do that while standing right next to him, but the very moment he opened his mouth, an earth-shattering roar could be heard from the base of the mountain. Both of them snapped back to attention. They'd figured that some stragglers would still be around, but that had sounded an *awful* lot like the thing they'd just killed and really, neither of them had any particular desire to face another of those.

To their surprise and worry both, though, the earth started shaking soon after. And mere seconds later, another of those snake-snail-things with too many heads appeared. This one, however, offered two glaring differences to the one they'd beaten seconds ago.

Facing an enemy with seven or eight heads and a nearly impenetrable shell that was about 15 feet tall was hard enough. Facing an enemy with roughly *twenty heads* and a nearly impenetrable shell that was about *45 feet tall* was leaving them both stunned, mouths wide open and eyes as large as saucers. Fighting a gigantic statue was one thing, but a *living creature* with a body as large and massive as a two-story house? For whatever reason, Nero briefly wondered what the likes of Belial or Echidna might've said to this. *They'd* already been big, but compared to this thing, they reminded him more of young hooligans trying to prove something rather than the dangerous demon rulers they actually were. Atsuma next to him seemed to agree, albeit indirectly, judging his reaction.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!"

Chapter 4

Atsuma's scandalised shout had also gained both Dante's and Tōya's attention. They'd teamed up to track down and kill the few demons that had gotten away from their half of the battlefield, but upon hearing their companion, their heads whipped around into the direction of his voice. Tōya did a double take upon seeing the gigantic beast- even from this distance of over 400 feet, it looked incredibly impressive. For the first time today, raw emotion- namely, surprise- showed on his face. Even Dante looked more than just a little impressed, his eyebrows raised so high they'd disappeared underneath his hair. It took a moment, but after a second or two, the veteran hunter tore his icy blue eyes away from the giant to make out both Atsuma and Nero in the distance, looking even filthier than he and his temporary partner did, but in pretty good health. He couldn't make out any details, of course, but their both stances looked normal. Well, aside from Atsuma's right hand that was pointing at the creature approaching the two young men.

Dante could suddenly hear a sharp *cling* when Tōya gripped his spear so tight his knuckles turned white, his eyes suddenly very hard and cold. He was grinding his teeth as he stared in the direction of their companions, leaving the demon hunter mildly curious. It took him less than a second to figure out that Tōya was insanely worried about the other two- well, maybe one moreso than the other, but still.

„Come on, we've got to help them.“

Without even waiting for an answer, the blue-clad student dashed off in the direction of their friends and the beast that was slowly getting close enough to start attacking the two young men. Giving himself another two seconds to observe, Dante nodded when they both fought off their petrification and dived into opposite directions to evade the huge jaw aiming for them. As soon as he saw the two getting back up off the floor, Dante, too, broke into a sprint, following Tōya to aid in taking this thing down. He trusted Nero to take care of himself, especially since he hadn't needed to trigger yet as well, and this Atsuma didn't strike him as a weakling or newbie, either, but he was not going to risk anyone getting hurt today.

And being eaten by that thing certainly qualified as 'getting hurt'.

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Unlike Atsuma, who only slowly regained his wits, Nero was already furiously thinking about a way to take this monster down somehow. Eyeing it warily as he zigzagged in a mad dash to left and right, one jaw after another snapping close in the spots he'd been a second ago, he couldn't really think of a lot they *could* do at this point.

Yes, they had managed to get through the smaller version of this thing to end its miserable existence, but with twice as many heads and a lot more reach, there just weren't any openings they could abuse to get close. They needed to create an opening themselves, but the way it looked now, that was going to be almost

impossible- neither he nor Atsuma had the time to stay in one place for more than half a second. Not exactly the best prerequisites to try anything but keep running at this point.

Feeling his blood rising and a darker power pulsing inside of him, Nero decided to simply throw all caution into the wind and do what he could do in this situation. Which meant facing this beast down head-on. Grinding his teeth, he increased his speed and pulled out his trusty revolver. He doubted the shells would even do the tiniest bit of damage, but that wasn't what he was hoping for. He shot blindly into a cluster of multiple heads, assuming they'd hit their mark anyway. And besides- the more heads he got, the better. His plan's success became obvious when the frequency of the jaws closing in on him increased rapidly- he knew he was already *beyond* pushing it if the teeth grazing him, ripping his coat to shreds and even tearing his jeans in places and leaving red gashes behind in his flesh were any indication. Figuring seven heads right on his tail were enough if he didn't want to risk ending his life prematurely by even the tiniest mistake, Nero braced his leg against the ground mid-dash, turned around and used his momentum to launch himself into the direction he'd just come from- right into a few snake's heads with dozens of thin teeth almost as long as he was tall.

He crashed right into them, the impact causing his bones to rattle and less than a second later, a sharp pain shot through his leg, a distracted look revealing a razor-sharp tooth going straight through his thigh, almost taking it off entirely. Biting his lip, he summoned the power resting within and felt it surging forth, pulsating through his entire body before being unleashed in a powerful explosion of blue light.

Nero almost fell to his knees as his vision flashed white due to the burning in his leg and a pained scream tore out of his throat. It was drowned out by the agonising screeches the humongous demon was letting out of its remaining heads, however, so not even he could hear its echo. The shockwave had forcefully pushed the heads around him away- as he'd expected and counted on-, but that also meant the tooth lodged in his leg had been pushed out, tearing more flesh and bones apart that were now knitting themselves back together, the infernal pain subsiding and making place for a dull ache that would fade soon as well.

Forcing himself to open his red-glowing eyes, he pushed himself back into a standing position again, the material of his right pant leg hanging down in tatters, soaked in his own blood. He looked at the beast that was thrashing around, long necks twisting and turning as it continued to scream. His stunt had blown two heads clean off and fried another two, leaving them almost entirely harmless- well, not as much as he'd hoped for, but that was at least something. Maybe it would give him just a little more room to breathe and try figuring something out.

Unlike its smaller counterpart, this giant recovered from this blow a lot faster. The decapitated and charred stumps were curled close to its body and oozing blood in thick drips onto the ground, but new ones were already searching for his presence again. It moved its huge body into his direction, deceptively quick despite its mass and raised almost half of its heads high into the air before arching over him- and a brown, mud-like substance swelled forth from its maws, aiming for an area of which he was the centre. In the same moment Nero kicked himself off the ground to get out of the

danger zone, he inwardly cursed that he couldn't use his *Devil Bringer* in the same way he normally would. But utilising the spectral arm on something as big as this needed concentration and also a moment of stillness, and even though the scales had proven to be equally impenetrable as this creature's shell, that didn't account for all that much if it could just eat him along *with* his arm.

The muddy mass was descending onto him quickly, accelerated by the pressure of which the beast expelled it while simultaneously turning its heads to keep following him. Although he was pushing himself and his limits to go faster, it was coming ever the closer and just when he knew that he couldn't get away and was bracing himself for the impact and any possible results of coming in touch with this substance, did a white and blue pattern above him materialise, lines weaving intricate designs to form a cocoon around him. Slightly surprised, Nero kept moving, the glowing shell following him as the brown liquid harmlessly slid off, not a drop touching him directly. He wasn't quite sure what was happening next, but he could hear the sound of waves coming rapidly closer and mere seconds later, water was washing the mud away. He stopped, watching as a large wave, three times as tall as he was and just as wide cleared all the snake-snail-vomit away before forcefully crashing into its producer itself. The protective shield around him was fading as the young hunter saw the beast being pushed back by the pressure ever so slightly, jaws snapping at thin air but unable to reach him. He felt another person standing next to him and glanced to his right.

Tōya was standing there, looking decidedly more ragged than earlier today with sweat dripping down his temples. He was breathing heavily, his face both pale and red at the same time from exhaustion. He was gripping his spear tightly and spared Nero only a quick look along with a short nod and the customary *You okay? Good.* before his blue eyes focussed on another spot in the distance, slightly to the left of the giant beast. His mouth was pressed into a thin line as he watched grimly and Nero followed his trail of sight.

He was just in time to watch Atsuma fending off an attacking head with burning fists when another was closing in on him. Before it could get too close, however, *Rebellion* suddenly came flying from the side, going straight through its neck, the impact knocking it down and pinning it to the ground. Less than a second later, Dante leapt in and simply threw a surprised Atsuma over his shoulder before heading in their direction with a series of long jumps. As soon as they reached Tōya and him, Dante put the other man back onto the ground, who then proceeded to scratch the back of his head with a sheepish expression before offering his thanks for the save. Giving his older relative a brief look, he noted how beaten-up he, too, looked, although he'd managed to stay unscathed as of yet. His attention was back on Atsuma again, however, when the red-clad student put his hands together and momentarily closed his eyes, followed by a small, white light surrounding him and finally settling in his chest. Nero watched with mild amazement as his scratches closed again, leaving unharmed, albeit scarred, flesh behind.

"Huh. That's useful", Dante voiced both their thoughts as Atsuma opened his eyes again and let out a small laugh.

"Haha, yeah. It takes a moment, though, so it's not really useful directly in battle. It's great to keep me going during short breathers like this, though. But Tōya, you look more than spent, you should fall back and-"

"Don't worry about me, Atsuma, I still have a trick or two up my sleeve."

Atsuma looked doubtful, but instead of voicing his disagreement, he shrugged his shoulders and brought his hands together once more. This time, it took a moment longer, but then his entire body started glowing along with some sparks. It disappeared after a moment, but when he opened his heterochromic eyes once more, they were flashing with an entirely new strength and fighting spirit. He slammed his right fist into the palm of his hand and offered them all a grin. As he was about to open his mouth, his gaze settled on Nero and instead of speaking, he let out a surprised noise.

"Whoa! What's *that*?"

Nero stared at his new friend blandly for a moment before he remembered that he had triggered earlier. Funny how this seemed to shock him while his own, wondrous abilities didn't. Instead of answering- not that he was entirely sure how to explain the spirit made out of blue light hovering behind him, but oh well- he decided to be the voice of reason for once.

"I'd say we save the chit-chat for *after* we've dealt with our big bud behind us."

Atsuma did another double-take upon hearing his echoing voice, but Nero paid that no mind. Instead, he awaited confirmation from the three of them, which Dante and Tōya immediately gave in form of a nod. A short moment later, the red-clad student agreed as well. All four of them turned to face the giant creature again that was straining against the water pushing it back. It had been trying to reach them, but the wave pressing against it proved to be powerful enough to lock them both into place. Nero assumed that was one of the reasons why Tōya was looking so spent- not that he knew all that much about this Enchantment-business, but from what little he'd seen and gathered, this must've taken a lot of effort.

The very moment the blue-clad student lifted the Enchantment, the water slowly disappearing, his shoulders sagged and he took multiple deep breaths, looking exhausted, but also a lot less tense. The same second that the huge demon was able to overpower the force of the water was also their starting signal, and all three of them rushed forward. Out of the corner of his eye, Nero could see Dante flicking his wrist, causing *Rebellion* to return to its owner who caught it easily with his other hand. Nero called *Yamato* forth, figuring that he might as well give it a shot- this sword was supposed to cut through anything, right? Although before he could even attempt to cut through the creature's hard shell protecting its soft body, more than a dozen heads were already aiming for the three of them again. They all scattered, jumping into different directions to increase their chance of getting close enough to do some actual damage and Nero could see Dante throwing his sword once again. *Rebellion* cut off another head and damaged one more throat before slowing in mid-air to stop and return. Nero growled as he rolled to the side, evading sharp teeth for the umpteenth

time. Sometimes he wanted a sword like that, too. It seemed hella useful. Not to mention that it would speed this fight up immensely- he was getting more than sick of being forced to constantly try and avoid being skewered. Or digested.

Putting one foot behind his other to strengthen his stance, Nero's eyes locked on one of the heads descending onto him. Instead of diving to the side, however, he stayed where he was, *Yamato* raised and ready. As soon as he could see through its widely opened mouth directly into its cavity, the young hunter seemingly disappeared in a flash, reappearing a couple feet further directly underneath its throat. Which showed to be cut open straight in the middle seconds later, the beast's scream dying in its damaged throat before the accompanying head slumped down to the ground lifelessly. Not wasting any time, he rushed forward again, ignoring the sudden burst of flames on his other side that also cut one of the demon's shrieks short. The sickening smell of burnt flesh he was so familiar with entered his nose and he snorted, his red-glowing eyes focussing on another head that was about to spit the same brown substance out as it had earlier. The moment it started leaving its mouth, he kicked himself off the ground and jumped to the side, but upon hitting the ground with such pressure, the gooey mass splattered in all directions. He avoided most of it, but some sprayed onto what had remained of his coat- and burnt right through it like an acid, sizzling and smoking. Slightly bewildered, he sent a brief prayer of gratitude in the direction he'd last seen Tōya in- getting hit with a whole load of this stuff would have been- *uncomfortable*, to say the least.

"Tōya!"

Nero's head snapped to his right, alarmed at the shout, but all he could see was Atsuma standing still, one arm raised into the air and red light gathering in his skyward palm. Another small ball of light, this one light blue in colour, came flying from behind them and swirled around the other before merging with it. And to both his surprise and amazement, another light spontaneously formed at his *Devil Bringer*. It was a darker shade of blue, exactly the same as the spirit towering behind him and it instantly floated over to Atsuma to join the others. The ball turned orange and started spreading, first covering the student's hand and then his arm before it began drawing more of those patterns he'd already seen into the air. But instead of staying like that, the lines quickly turned into fire and Nero did a double-take when he realised it was adapting the shape of a giant bird- or rather Phoenix. As soon as it was complete, the majestic looking bird made out of flames straightened once before leaning down again, following the movement's of Atsuma's hand as he led it towards their enemy. It flew right into the beast's body, engulfing it in fire that quickly caused the creature to start screeching again in pain. Smoke was rising from its body even before the phoenix had passed it entirely to finally dissipate behind it, leaving scorch marks all over its shell. Another two heads had failed to get out of the firebird's way and were now rendered use- and lifeless, leaving only charred clumps behind that were attached to twitching throats.

Even though about half of the beast's necks were incapacitated and rendered harmless, it was not about to give in. Quite the contrary, actually, because a mighty roar erupted out of its remaining throats, chunks of the brown acid as well as frothy saliva raining down on the three of them. Nero brought up his arms to cover his face

and saw his two companions doing the same. Bits of the mud-coloured substance hit each of them, smoke rising from their melting clothes and burning skin. What they couldn't see, however, was the demon raising its massive body high into the air, supported by short, but sturdy legs no one realised it had hidden underneath its impenetrable shell. It lifted its corpus about seven or eight feet up and stayed like that for a moment, swaying a little back and forth-

And then, at least 40 tonnes of flesh, bones and shell came crashing down onto the ground.

Nero let out a startled shout and accidentally let himself de-trigger out of surprise as the floor beneath his feet started shaking, tears appearing in the abused earth. He almost lost his balance and stumbled a couple steps back, the ground rumbling and moving underneath his boots. Apparently, there were some caves or other empty rooms underground, for he could see entire chunks of the surface simply breaking away, leaving dark holes behind that seemed to go a lot deeper than anyone might have guessed beforehand. The young hunter ripped his *Red Queen* off his back and stabbed it into the ground in front of him, holding tight onto its handle in order to aid his struggle against this artificial earthquake. He could see Dante doing the same, *Rebellion* halfway buried in a chunk of earth that resisted the rumbling and shaking caused by the monster. At the same time his relative lifted his head to focus on said beast, probably already devising a plan to take this thing down *fast* despite the floor breaking apart beneath them, he heard a yelp on his other side followed by the thundering noise of shattering earth.

Turning his head just in time to see the ground underneath Atsuma giving away, causing the student to fall back into one of the deep-looking cave-ins, Nero felt his blood run cold. Not wasting even a split second to think, he let go of his *Red Queen* and rushed over, skidding to a halt on the slippery floor directly in front of the hole he'd seen his new friend fall into. He knelt down at the edge, ignoring the bits and pieces of stone breaking off and falling into the darkness with small *clinks*. His vision was slightly blurred from the still moving and shaking earth, but he could make Atsuma's bright red uniform out just fine- he was just swinging onto a small platform in the face of the freshly created cliff with some sort of grapple. His quick reaction had obviously saved him so far, but his face was more than a little pale. Nero could see his eyes widen when Atsuma spotted him crouching at the edge of the miniature cliff above him.

"ATSUMA!"

Tōya was at Nero's side immediately, his face entirely void of its usual calm and instead distorted in a grimace of raw panic as he dropped to the ground, air leaving his lungs in ragged and faltering breaths.

Nero didn't pay him any mind as he lowered himself even further onto the floor, as far as his position allowed. The ground was still rumbling, the earthquake still causing more rifts. Lying down to increase his reach would've been too dangerous just in case the surface right underneath him was going to give in, too. Leaning forward to a dangerous degree, he clung to the edge of the cliff he was crouching at, reaching

down with his *Devil Bringer*. After a short moment of hesitation, Atsuma lifted his right arm, stretching his body as far up as it allowed. The ledge he was standing on was crumbling underneath him, promising him a very deep descend if they didn't hurry.

Their fingertips touched and Nero felt a jolt running through his arm as if it had been electrified. Judging the way the other man twitched violently as well, he'd probably felt it, too, but he kept reaching up. The part-devil strained his shoulder as much as he could without dislocating it- not that it would be a lasting problem, but if there was something lacking right now, it was time to let it heal again. Their fingers brushed against each other a few more times, each contact shooting another spark through his *Devil Bringer*. After a few more tries, their palms finally, *finally* connected and their fingers clasped instantly, both putting all their considerable strength into this deathgrip. Oddly enough, Nero was suddenly sure his fingers would be broken if he was anyone else, but he quickly pushed that thought aside again. The current in his demonic limb increased, heating it up and causing a restlessness to invade him. Ignoring this reaction, however, Nero pushed with his human hand against the ground as he lifted Atsuma up. The first inches were slow, but as soon as he could use his shoulders as leverage as well, he hauled the older man over the edge of the cliff and back into safety, the force behind this movement causing the freshly rescued student to stumble forward a little. It didn't hide the fact, however, that he, too, was apparently feeling something unusual. His face was contorted in exertion and he was gripping his right wrist tightly as his legs gave in.

Nero let out a breath he didn't know he was holding and dropped to his knees as well. He was panting, mostly because of his strangely behaving arm. It was glowing a bright blue, much brighter than he'd ever seen before. One look to Atsuma revealed that he, too, seemed to be struggling with his own particular appendage again. The golden lines were back, pulsating in an almost soothing rhythm as the student was clutching his wrist. He heard a moan leaving his lips and as Atsuma lifted his head, Nero noticed that his right eye, normally purple, was glowing scarlet as well as a dark patch forming around it. The light from his artificial limb shone brighter and brighter before it seemingly *left* the skin, wandering up his biceps and reaching his shoulder as it turned into fine, swirling lines that were red in colour, his entire arm turning black. And then, just like that, outgrowths spread on his shoulder, ragged at the edges as if they were carved from rocks.

His own arm was getting unbearably hot and Nero felt his vision being blinded by a curtain of red. His blood was boiling and he suddenly felt an indescribable thirst for power and revenge and the desire to *hurt and harm and destroy and killkillKILL*, almost overtaking him. He fell to his knees, his chest heaving and his eyes shut tight as he struggled to force those urges down. It wasn't as if his *Devil Bringer* had always been entirely silent- he remembered that time very well when it had yearned for more strength back in Agnus' lab, when he'd toed the line between life and death. But this was different, it was much stronger and more nuanced, but at the same time, it also felt more basic, as if it was its *purpose* instead of desire.

He heard Atsuma moan in an inhuman voice next to him, also crouched on the floor as he seemed to be fighting his own battle with the power residing within his artificial

arm. Through his veiled vision, he could barely make out Tōya who was still lacking his earlier composure entirely as he was staring at the two of them, jaw slack and eyes widened.

“Goddamnit... *I'm your Master!*”, he heard Atsuma growl, voice growing louder at the end of his sentence. He punched the ground with his transformed arm, which only caused it to glow even brighter, red lines flashing menacingly as the student finished with a drawn-out shout from deep within his lungs.

This was the moment Nero realised that their arms seemed to not just react to, but actually *affect* each other somehow, because in the same second Atsuma seemed to inwardly arch against the demands of his own limb, was the feeling in his *Devil Bringer* intensifying as well. As if through cotton, he could feel Dante's demonic energy flickering back and forth, erratic as if its inner balance was being disturbed by the two of them but quite frankly, Nero couldn't care less. Dante was more than capable of watching his own butt, proven by the fact that he'd managed to keep the gigantic beast occupied as he and Atsuma were fighting their own, personal demons.

He was gritting his teeth so hard he could feel his jaw cracking when, all of a sudden, the entire outburst of primal desires and instincts simply vanished, leaving only a gentle hum and the familiar part of his demonic heritage behind. He slowly opened his eyes, vision as sharp as ever, as he carefully climbed to his feet. To his surprise, Atsuma was not only as still as a statue now, but also deadly silent. His eyes were closed and the rapidly flashing lines on his now obviously inhuman arm stopped blinking frantically, resuming their slow, rhythmic pulsing Nero had almost gotten used to by now instead. Then, the black fingers twitched and Atsuma opened his eyes again before cautiously rising to stand. The buzz inside of Nero's *Devil Bringer* seemed to resonate with the older male's movements and he unconsciously shifted his weight to shoot a contemplative look at it. Atsuma's head whipped up and he stared at Nero as the latter moved- okay, apparently, his *Devil Bringer* wasn't reacting to Atsuma's artificial arm, they were reacting to each other. Interesting. He had no idea why or how or what for, but it was definitely interesting.

Their eyes locked and after a short moment, Nero felt a smirk sneaking its way onto his face, mirrored by the grin Atsuma's lips were curling into. It almost seemed as if they understood each other entirely without words now and without further ado, they both nodded and rushed towards the gigantic creature that had been all but forgotten, having had only Dante as a playmate for the previous minutes. Summoning forth *Yamato* once more, he and Atsuma could approach the demon freely as it was much too occupied with Dante- who was jumping from head to head, looking as if he was having the time of his life every time he caused the heads to bite one another in their attempt to get him off. The young part-devil snorted- *figured* that Dante would turn this into a game while everyone else was struggling with inhuman body parts and supernatural beings within those body parts.

As soon as he was close enough, Nero flash-stepped onto the other side of the beast, going entirely unnoticed. At least, until the beast momentarily stilled as cuts appeared on its shell- before it fell apart, some of the plates sliding to the ground with heavy *thuds* and revealing soft, green flesh. The same second the monster

decided that Dante was the lesser threat and instead turned its remaining heads to Nero, did Atsuma draw his black-and-red arm back as he was still running, white light gathering around it, before throwing himself fist-first into the demon's vulnerable, unprotected side.

A ripple went through its soft body and it stopped moving entirely. It wasn't dead yet, however, so Nero vanished *Yamato* again, calling his spectral arm forth instead and let it grow in size until it was almost as big as it had been when he'd crushed the Saviour's head back in Fortuna. He leaned back, balancing on his right leg in order to put as much force as possible into this punch and could see Atsuma doing the same on the beast's other side. A growling shout tore free from his vocal chords, in tune with the ever-increasing hum in his demonic arm as he threw his body forward, his motion mirrored twenty-five feet away from him, and felt his fist connecting hard with the green body, the much larger phantom version above him doing the same.

And finally- *finally* did the beast let out its final wail, a cry so high-pitched and loud Nero had to cover his ears as they ripped out of multiple throats at the same time. The massive body started to melt, the remains sinking onto the ground and disappearing as its initial form was distorted by the bubbles rising to the liquid's surface. Three minutes later, the creature was gone as well as what had been left of it, only the destroyed ground with miniature canyons and ragged earth everywhere providing evidence of the battle that had transpired here.

And two bodies of young men returned to their human form again, adrenaline leaving their veins and making space for the exhaustion that followed, and they sank to their knees.

Chapter 5

Dante, figuring that Nero and Atsuma would finish this fight any time now, retreated to look after the fourth member of their little group who'd sunk to the floor due to sheer overexertion. Deactivating his *Devil Trigger*, he strolled to the blue-clad student as the other two were landing the finishing blows on their gigantic friend and met the dulled eyes with a half-grin of his own. Kneeling down next to him, he followed the younger man's line of sight. Beastie was just ascending to a higher plane of existence in form of a huge puddle of sticky goo and the hunter nodded to himself.

This fight had been interesting. More than that, actually- not only had it been a challenge, it had also caused him to go through one roller-coaster of emotions, all things considered. Even though nothing could've kept him from smiling like some sort of madman when he saw both Atsuma and Nero awakening their inner powers to finally take their opponent down, he *was* going to give Nero an earful for his stunt earlier. His heart had stopped for longer than just a second when he'd seen his last living relative *throwing himself* right into a handful of gaping jaws with teeth longer and sharper than he cared for. Unlike Nero, Dante had actually *seen* what this idea had done besides blowing up a couple heads- which, admittedly, had been a good shot. Namely the long tooth not only impaling his younger friend, but the blast knocking it back almost causing him to tear his own leg off entirely. It couldn't have been more than an inch or two of skin and muscle remaining to keep it attached to his body. Relief had flooded him upon seeing his partner on his knees, but intact.

Only to be replaced by worry and a slight hint of panic again when almost a dozen heads had risen to shower Nero with the acidic substance at the same time. He hated to admit, but if it hadn't been for Tōya- who's rational and calculating mind was still working despite the immense fright he'd obviously felt for his childhood friend-, that might have been the end for Nero, and maybe even himself, too. Even if he *had* managed to get close enough to do something, he was still at a loss as to *what* he could have done to get them both to safety. But his client had motioned to him that he'd take care of Nero while at the same time asking him to help Atsuma, something he'd immediately agreed to. He'd already seen enough of Tōya to figure that he had to have an idea if he was dishing out plans like that. So while the student had taken to save his relative's butt, he'd jumped in to get Atsuma out of the assaulting heads, the young man thankfully fine aside from a few scratches and bruises.

From then on, the fight had been difficult, but not nearly as bad for his heart. Sure, he'd startled as well when beastie had decided to cause a freaking earthquake, especially when Atsuma had lost his footing and fallen into one of the rips in the ground, but as soon as he saw both Nero and Tōya rushing over to help, he had no qualms about leaving it in their capable hands, instead opting to keep their enemy busy and their backs free. Which had been kinda fun, too, and that was always a plus.

Dante had felt that strange surge in both familiar and unknown energy as well, his demonic heritage reacting to it erratically, but he'd been too busy playing catch with a dozen heads to actually check what was happening. Seeing the two youngsters return,

both their incredible powers unleashed and proceeding to pound their beast-friend into the ground had been more than satisfying.

And here he was now, Tōya's arm slung over his shoulder and leading the both of them to their friends who were still on all fours due to overwhelming exhaustion, but conscious and, in Atsuma's case, mostly unhurt. His client let go of him in order to walk the last few steps to his childhood friend on his own, plopping down on the ground next to him, as Dante made his way over to Nero. Crouching down, he placed a hand on the younger part-demon's shoulder, taking in how he was staring at the ground beneath them with unfocussed eyes, hair drenched with sweat.

"You okay?", Dante asked quietly, looking for any hints of lasting damage, as unlikely as they were. Nero's healing factor was a little weaker than his own when in human form, but definitely not while they were triggered. He hadn't seen anything that would have caused him any lasting injuries, so there shouldn't be any on Nero, either, but better be safe than sorry.

"Nothing a good night's sleep won't fix. Damn, I'm *spent*", the hunter muttered, a wry half-smirk sneaking onto his lips. "Don't just stand there. Help me up, man", he ordered, his voice tired, but humorous. Dante let out a small laugh before obliging, putting one arm around Nero's waist to assist him in getting into an upright position. As soon as he was standing, the younger man stretched, his spine popping back into place loudly and a groan escaped his lips. Stepping away, slightly wobbly, but otherwise fine, he rolled his shoulders and turned to face Dante properly.

"I guess we're done here, huh?"

Shrugging, Dante crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"You'd know better than me. You're the one with the D-dar."

"Yeah, that one's still feeling kinda funky right now... But I don't think there are any demons left." He turned to the other two who were now sitting next to each other, talking quietly.

"You guys ready to go back?", he inquired, noting mildly curious how they seemed to be both focussing on Atsuma's artificial limb. Mismatched eyes shifted to meet his own and a sheepish grin appeared on the tanned face.

"I will be in a moment, but I think Tōya's going to need some help."

"I'd appreciate if you didn't decide that for me. But I'm afraid he is right. I've consumed a *God's Ambrosia* to heal my bruises and accelerate the rate at which I naturally replenish Ether, but I fear I overexerted myself." Upon finishing, his cool demeanour slipped and he shot a look of sheer incredulity at the two demon hunters. "I don't understand how you can be *fine* like that after this. I thought Atsuma's stamina is ridiculous, but the two of you are something else entirely." And then something akin to miraculous curiosity entered his eyes as if they were objects to be studied.

Nero merely shrugged his shoulders and looked away, uncomfortable under the scrutiny once more, whereas Dante merely laughed.

“That's demon-hybrids for you. Plus we're kind of used to this, it *is* our job, after all.”

Tōya muttered something under his breath aforementioned hybrids couldn't quite make out, but Nero had the feeling it was nothing overly flattering- an assumption supported by the fact that it was now Atsuma's turn to look pole-axed, hissing “Tōya!” to reprimand his friend. He and Dante snorted in tandem, not offended at all. They'd seen enough of the blue-clad student to know that he didn't mean any harm and was merely worn out beyond the point of keeping up his normally distanced and calculating behaviour, making him actually seem like the young man he was. Nero was just about to suggest weaving through the tears in the earth to return to *Yokohama City* when he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his ear. Letting out a surprised “Ow!”, he whipped around, foreign fingers still clamped around his helix and found himself face to face with Dante who growled at him. Bringing up his hands to slap the abusive fingers away, he was stopped mid-movement when his older relative poked him into the chest *hard*.

“What the hell is wrong with-”

“*That-*”, Dante began his explanation, the word empathised by twisting his fingers sharply, tearing another yelp out of Nero, “is what you get for nearly giving me a heart attack. I should ask what the hell is wrong with *you* for throwing yourself right a bunch of beastie's heads.”

“But that-” His protests were cut short by another twist.

“Hush. I know why you did it and it was a good shot, but that was still beyond dangerous and reckless, even for the likes of us. Just imagine how you would feel if you had to watch dear old me pulling a stunt like that.”

Not waiting for an answer, he finally released Nero's reddened ear who reflexively brought his hand up to gently rub the abused body part. As soon as Dante turned away, however, Nero glared at his back, cheeks flaming, & muttered “Good riddance...” under his breath to no one in particular. Dante's ear twitched.

“What was that?”

“Nothing! So you going to help Tōya? You've probably got the most energy left out of all of us”, the young hunter suggested, changing the topic as he tried to will the blood out of his face. Tōya looking amused and Atsuma grinning like a lunatic weren't helping that, either. Dante didn't even bother to reply and instead just went over to their client, crouched onto the floor and offered his shoulder. After some shuffling, Tōya's arm was securely slung around the hunter's neck as the latter lifted them both into a standing position. Nero went over to Atsuma and held after a brief moment of hesitation his left hand out to help him up as well. The latter smiled wryly as he took it.

"Not gonna risk another strange reaction, huh? Well, it's not like I can blame you. That was *weird*."

Nero merely nodded as he pulled the older male to his feet, both of them turning around to follow their friends who were already strolling ahead. Making a short bee-line to pick up his *Red Queen*, which had still been lodged in the ground where he'd left it when the pseudo-earthquake started, all four of them made their way through the remains of the plains, carefully avoiding all the spots that looked unstable. Their way back was mostly silent, neither being in the mood for idle chatter, but rather mulling the things that had transpired here today over. Some of them were most fascinating, after all.

The sun was beginning to set by the time they arrived back at *Yokohama City*, filthy and their clothes in tatters. Especially Nero, with his jeans bearing little resemblance to actual legwear anymore, was drawing attention to their little group, but neither of them particularly cared. The young part-demon made a quick stop at the car he and Dante had arrived in to dig their spare clothes out of the trunk- they were going to stay for the night. Tōya had offered them a room in the university's dormitory as well as free meals this evening and the next morning before they'd start their two-day trip back to *Capulet City*. Atsuma had looked a little doubtful at that, but Tōya had waved him off, stating with a tired but mischievous gleam in his eyes that he could pull some strings as headstudent and resident genius. And thus, the two hunters, not *particularly* in the mood to be sitting in a cramped car for the next 40 hours, had quickly accepted.

Agreeing to meet in the cafeteria again in about an hour, the two half-demons headed to their designated room. It was simple and clean, offering everything that was necessary for a student. Two beds were situated in opposing corners, two closets next to them and a pair of desks with some shelves were the only furniture. A quick look revealed that the door between the beds led to a small, but functional bathroom. Grabbing his change of clothes and throwing Dante's on one of the beds, Nero instantly announced that he'd shower first. Getting out of his now rather crunchy jeans that were scattering flakes of dry blood like snow with each of his movements was his top priority. Dante merely waved him off as he begun to peel himself out of his shabby-looking coat.

About 30 minutes later, both part-devils were clean again and had changed into their spare attire. Nero had had to say adieu to his jeans, the remaining scraps far beyond salvation. Dante, realising his younger partner wasn't up for conversation right now, just watched him leave the room again. Although Nero knew he was too early, he already made his way back into the now-deserted cafeteria. The sun had almost disappeared behind the horizon now, colouring the sky in a deep red streaked with orange. He settled on a chair next to the opened door leading outside and put his feet on another. The part-devil could hear some rustling behind him and then the smell of fresh food entered his nose. With his stomach growling in response, he leaned back, putting his *Devil Bringer* behind his head and fondling *Blue Rose's* handle with the other.

Roughly half an hour later, Dante entered the room, followed by Atsuma and Tōya and all three joined him at the table. A minute later, a waitress brought over plates with steaming food, her smile looking more than a little tight, not particularly happy with having to serve customers- and strangers at that- at this hour. Most of the meal went over in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts, aside from a few snide remarks concerning the amount of food Atsuma wolfed down. Who merely buffed himself up in response, flexing his pretty impressive muscles and claiming he needed it to feed these guys, not himself. It didn't take long until they were finished, and thanks to the waitress standing nearby, glaring at the four, both students excused themselves, prompting Dante and Nero to return to their room for the night as well.

They plopped down on the beds, silence still surrounding them. Dante, leaning against the wall, propped his elbow in his knee and regarded his younger partner carefully before speaking up.

"So, you going to tell me now what happened back there?"

Nero plopped on his back, throwing his human arm up to cover his eyes. He felt *so strange*. He *knew* he'd said he'd tell Dante about it and he fully intended to, and yet... there was a part of him that didn't want him to, to keep this to himself. Maybe it was because although his *Devil Bringer* looked and behaved normally again, it still felt different. It was neither heating up nor glowing, obviously, but the hum was also gone. But if he focussed, he could still feel *something*, ever so faint, shifting along his veins as he flexed his fingers. He had no idea what it was, either. All he *did* know was that it was because of that weird reaction earlier, caused by his demonic arm touching Atsuma's artificial one. Maybe... Hadn't Atsuma said his arm was partly sentient, the same as his, and also liked to absorb things left and right? Perhaps that was the reason they'd resonated with each other so strongly.

Trapped in his own thoughts, he felt his frustration growing bigger at the obvious lack of answers. He knew it seemed out of character for him, but he couldn't help but find himself wanting explanations most likely no one could ever provide. Nero had had this arm for multiple years now and they hadn't gotten any closer in finding information on it. Sure, he knew what he could do with it, but what it was there for? Why he had it? What else it might be capable of? They'd sooner hunt demons on Uranus than find any of these answers, he pegged. And from what little he knew- *again, he knew so little and it was aggravating*-, Atsuma's arm was over a thousand years old. Fat chance they were going to find anything out about that one, too.

Thankfully, Dante didn't probe any further, instead just watching his young protégé as he was struggling with his own thoughts. It wasn't as if he was any smarter concerning this issue- he was probably even more confused by what had transpired earlier than Nero and Atsuma were- but he wasn't directly involved. He knew he *hated* it when he wasn't in full control of his body, be it manipulation, poison or whatever, so having one of his limbs doing whatever it wanted whenever the hell it wanted would leave him clawing at the walls, too. Even with his vast knowledge of demons and the underworld, not even he could hazard a guess as to what had happened.

The silence continued between them for a while. Time was passing slowly, lazily

ticking away without any regard for the young people struggling with themselves. After a while, Dante had entered a light doze- he wasn't going to fall into a deep slumber in a situation like this, but no point in counting the tiles in the ceiling. Nero, however, felt just as restless as before. After he'd just turned in his bed for the umpteenth time, he cursed in his head and stood up. Figuring he shouldn't cause a ruckus at this time of night, he silently pulled his boots on, leaving his coat and left the dormitory room, a pair of half-opened, grey eyes following his movements.

After a brief moment of orientation, the part-devil headed towards the middle of the complex. He needed some fresh air, maybe that would help him in getting rid of these pesky, stubborn thoughts roaming in his mind, causing more questions than they answered. Heading outside, he was greeted by a sight he had not expected.

The garden in the courtyard seemed to be glowing in the moonlight. Small, white lights were scattered around, illuminating the otherwise barely visible paths. Nero was almost expecting them to move as if they were a peculiar kind of fireflies. Closer inspection, however, revealed they were the star-shaped flowers he'd seen earlier that day, buds now opened and emitting a gentle light. His worries briefly forgotten at the marvellous display in front of him, he almost didn't hear the footsteps approaching. His *Devil Bringer*, however, was telling him exactly who it was.

"You can't sleep, either, huh", Atsuma stated as he came to stand next to Nero. The latter threw him a brief glance before shrugging, his attention returning to the display in front of him. This university was *amazing*. He flexed the fingers of his demonic arm, trying to get rid of the somewhat pleasant tingling that was appearing, however faint. Atsuma, a lot less subtle, threw a look at his own hand, brows furrowed, as he shook it a couple times.

"Yours is still acting up, too?", Nero asked, voice quiet in the silence of the night. The older male let out a long sigh as he stopped his endeavour.

"Yeah, it's different again, though... But man, that was *weird* today."

Nero laughed without a lot of humour. "You're telling me."

They were silent for a moment before Atsuma turned to face the demon hunter, face unusually thoughtful.

"You know... I don't think I've thanked you for saving me. So, uh... thanks a lot."

Nero merely shrugged. "Just returned the favour." Atsuma, however, shook his head. "Nah, you'd have been fine. Though I gotta say, I haven't met a lot of people able to lift over 200 pounds as easily as that."

Now Nero snorted, shooting a both amused and critical look at his new friend's rather impressive figure. Sure, he and Dante were anything but lanky, but Atsuma's arms looked like they were solely made out of pure muscle. There didn't seem to be an ounce of fat on that guy. "Says the guy who caused a minor earthquake by punching the ground."

Atsuma laughed as he shook his head. "That wasn't all me. Ether manipulation again."

Nero kept eyeing him.

"When you punched through that knight's armour *and* ribcage, too?"

After a short pause, the red-clad student smiled sheepishly and scratched the back of his head, his biceps, fully visible without the jacket, playing about at each movement. "Okay, I guess you got me there."

Feeling oddly satisfied at having won this mock-argument, a small smirk curled the corners of Nero's lips upwards. The restlessness he had been feeling up until now was fading away, most likely thanks to the company. He couldn't pinpoint the exact reason, but there was something about Atsuma that just made him feel comfortable. It wasn't unlike Dante's effect on him- even though they usually seemed to be either trading insults back and forth or were poking fun at everything the other did, he knew Dante was always watching his back and vice versa. What made this situation so strange was the short time it had taken for this feeling to come into existence, although it didn't take a genius to figure the reason for *that* out.

"You can feel it, too, can't you?", Atsuma asked silently, his tone calm yet also slightly wistful, mismatched eyes shifting between his own artificial limb and Nero's *Devil Bringer*, free for all to see without his coat. The older male was studying it intently now, taking in how the scales went up to his biceps, fading into skin around his shoulder. The soft, blue glow from his leathery palm and the lines weaving through the hide engulfing the limb in a gentle light. Feeling slightly put on the spot, Nero shifted a little under the attention but forced himself to keep his arm where it was. There really was *no reason at all* to try and hide it from Atsuma. He eyed the other man who brought his left hand up to run his fingers over the smooth scales of his demonic arm. They felt cool to the touch, making it obvious that his *Devil Bringer* still wasn't at its normal temperature. Unexpectedly, Atsuma's expression didn't change. He still looked sombre and contemplative.

"It's strange", he begun, voice halting for a brief moment as he rested his left hand on Nero's demonic arm. The fingers of his right hand twitched. "I never thought I'd meet someone else like that. Like... me. You know, at first, when my arm seemed to be drawn to yours- to you- I was only confused. But when you told me your story... It probably makes me look like a shitty person, but I was also kind of glad to have met you. I wasn't alone with this anymore. You know what it's like, don't you? To hear voices, too feel commands, to have your arm telling you what do to without wanting to. Tōya knows about all this, too, but he can't understand the way I- we do."

Nero could merely nod, the words reflecting some of the thoughts he'd had without realising what they were. But now that they were given shape, spoken out loud, he couldn't help but agree with them wholeheartedly. As much as he appreciated Dante and their relationship, his *Devil Bringer* had always been a weird subject. Partly because Nero never knew how to explain the things surrounding it and partly because- well, Dante couldn't know and never would. Unless he suddenly grew a

demonic limb as well.

“You know, earlier, when our arms touched- I told you about *Infinity*, haven't I? I haven't heard my arm speaking to me in years but at that moment... It was different, though. It was... distorted, the commands were not clear, but it still felt as if it was telling me to do *something*. Even though I learnt to control it back then... I almost lost it today. Took all I had to force the voices back, to stay myself.”

Nero's mouth suddenly felt dry. He had an idea where that came from- he'd felt a slightly different urge from usual as well, after all, much more primitive and feral than the cutting, striving demands for power his *Devil Bringer* had used to whisper into his ear- still did, occasionally. He shifted, trying to pull his arm back, but the fingers around his forearm tightened like a clamp, keeping it where it was. Atsuma's mismatched gaze slowly rose to meet his own, making the part-demon feel uncomfortable.

“That was because of you, wasn't it? The voices from your arm reawakened the ones in mine. Even made them stronger.” It wasn't a question. Nero hesitated for a moment before he nodded.

“Most likely.”

“I see.” The death-grip around his arm, however, was as tight as ever. Nero was starting to worry about what was going to happen now- maybe this strange feeling of comradeship in their shared circumstances didn't extend to the possibility of one causing the other to go utterly haywire. Atsuma had still looked pained about his memory of going out of control multiple years ago. His uneasiness, however, dissipated in an instant when the older male suddenly smiled at him, his grip loosening.

“But it was also thanks to you that I could fight it back again. It figured if you were able to ignore the voice of your arm, I could do it, too. Gotta set an example as your senpai, don't I?”

And just like that, the nearly tangible tension that had risen around them just disappeared like a puff of air. The older male laughed as he finally let Nero's arm go before pumping his fist and presenting the younger male his best, blindingly bright smile.

“That's it. If you've got any issues with your arm, just come hit me up. I know they're not exactly the same, but I still have some more experience with those and who knows, maybe that might come in handy some time. I'll tell Tōya to give you my number- I can't remember it for the *life* of me.”

Slightly flabbergasted, Nero couldn't do anything but nod, even if he also felt a smile tearing away at his lips. He turned to face his companion fully and held out his left hand.

“You guys already have our number. If you ever have any issues with demons- or anything else- don't hesitate to call. We'll make some space in our schedule.” Not that

it was that loaded to begin with.

"You bet!", Atsuma exclaimed cheerily, his grin stretching from ear to ear as he slapped his hand into the offered palm.

And with that, the depressing and sombre mood had vanished entirely. The two of them spent some more time talking and laughing beneath the stars, surrounded by softly glowing moonflowers before the exhaustion of the day finally caught up to them. It didn't take long until Atsuma was yawning throughout each of his sentences and even Nero had caught himself just staring blankly ahead at times. They finally bid each other a good night, spirits lifted, and headed for their respective rooms, the barely recognisably hum in their arms not unsettling anymore, but rather easing them into a peaceful sleep after a day filled with extraordinary events.

The next morning came far too soon for Nero's liking. He could already hear Dante shuffling around in their room as the younger hunter piled some more blankets onto his head. His older relative hadn't been asleep when he'd returned last night but at least pretended to, fully content with seeing him back safe and in an obviously better mood than before. Nero knew he wasn't going to get out of the needed conversation, but even that couldn't hamper his spirits as much as they did before he'd talked with Atsuma. Screwing his eyes tightly shut, the part-devil pressed his face into the pillows some more when the shuffling got louder. The way he figured, Dante would amuse him for only a few more minutes until he was going to be thrown out of bed- literally, if necessary. So even though he felt extremely comfortable in his current position on his stomach, sprawled over the entire bed with one hand dangling off the edge as well as half his leg, he prepared himself mentally for having this pleasure taken away soon enough.

And he proved to be right. Exactly two minutes and thirteen seconds later, he could hear an amused snort from above before a leather-gloved hand shook his shoulder. In a futile attempt of resistance, Nero merely swatted with his *Devil Bringer* at the intruding limb, tearing a laugh out of Dante's throat.

"One minute before I'll *make* you get up, kid."

"Try me."

Dropping his demonic arm back onto the mattress, Nero gave a slight moan and counted to twenty before finally forcing his eyes open. Pulling the pile of blankets off his head, he rose to a sitting position as a long yawn escaped his mouth and he stretched. As much as he wanted to keep the sleepiness, instincts and habit left him wide awake sooner rather than later and after a brief trip to the bathroom, he found himself fully clothed and ready to go. Attaching both *Blue Rose* as well as *Red Queen* to himself again, the two part-devils soon made their way to the cafeteria to meet up with their clients for the promised breakfast.

Despite the early hours, the hall was bustling with activity. Students were running left and right and it would have taken the two of them a moment to locate their companions- at least it would have if Nero hadn't known exactly where to find them

and determinedly pushed his way through the masses. A small case with what appeared to be the university's logo was sitting on the table between the two students who were chatting among themselves. As soon as they saw the two hunters approaching, they waved.

The meal didn't take long. Piling the used dishes onto each other and setting them to the side, Tōya pushed the black case towards Dante and Nero. With a nod and a slight smile, he clarified: "Your payment."

Both demon hunters were about to object- albeit for different reasons- but as soon as they opened their mouths, Tōya raised his hand to stop them.

"I figured you'd be unwilling. I took the liberty to do some research and have gathered that you- both of you- tend to let assignments go unpaid in certain circumstances. I'll let you know, however, that this was an official assignment I gave to you in my function as headstudent of *Yokohama University for Enchantment* in order to protect both its students and staff as well as the civilians living in this city. So I must absolutely insist the two of you take your rightful payment."

Dante and Nero shared a long look, their tendency to consider jobs like these personal favours rather than business battling with their client's logic. Ultimately, they both gave in and Dante took the case while inclining his head.

"Much appreciated, then."

The very moment the school bell rang, signalling the imminent start of the first classes and causing students left and right to startle before jumping from their seats to rush out of the cafeteria, also meant the end of this trip. The two demon hunters rose to their feet, about to say goodbye, but both Tōya and Atsuma also stood. Atsuma grinned and pointed with his thumb to his childhood friend.

"Headstudent. He pulled some strings so we have the day off. We'll see you guys out of town, at least."

And with that, the four of them made their way out of the tall structure before leaving the campus. The festival, which had been in full blast and was also being fully ignored upon their return the previous day, was only starting to come back to life now. Most of the stalls were still closed, only very few were being set up again already. The journey to their car took only a few minutes. Dante put both their weapons as well as the case on the back seat before taking the keys out of the pocket of his coat.

Nero had just turned to Tōya and Atsuma for a final farewell when he heard Dante's "Here!" before he raised his hand and caught their keys blindly. Tōya blinked at him while Atsuma's grin only widened as he winked. Nero returned the gesture before holding out his left hand once again, shaking theirs one after another.

"You see, if you ever feel like letting me do some research-", Tōya started, but Atsuma quickly put a hand on his friend's mouth, muffling his voice.

"Don't listen to him. And you, Tōya, *behave*. I swear you're getting crazier for stuff like this by the month... Anyway. I hope we'll hear from you guys soon, okay? Have a good trip back!" And then he leaned forward, his childhood friend still in a headlock in order to keep him silent. "Our private numbers are in that case, too. I told Tōya to put them in there, so don't be a stranger, okay?", he added quietly.

"Thanks." A slightly crooked smile sneaked onto Nero's lips as he nodded once before turning to the car and seeing Dante waving at their new friends as well. The younger hunter opened the door and dropped into the seat, hands on the steering wheel and key in the ignition, not even bothering to give Dante any more seconds than necessary to get in as well. The entire vehicle shook as the older hunter forcefully plopped into the passenger seat, causing wariness about its condition to rise once again.

"Ten hours, then it's your turn."

"Yes, yes, whatever you say, Mister All-I-Needed-Was-A-Friend."

Nero didn't even bother to look or reply as he started the car while clonking Dante over the head with the hilt of his *Blue Rose*, soon leaving their waving friends behind on their way back home.