

“Ah, but I will gladly walk you home, however, and I do have an item or two to pick up, so I did not intend to lie to you. But, er...”

“Is this about Rika?”

“...It is,” he admitted, walking a step behind Chiho. “Have you met her before?”

“Yes,” she replied, “on the same day you did.”

“I see.” He nodded, looking more hesitant than Chiho had ever seen him before. “It makes sense, then. Emilia seemed entirely unaware.”

His voice indicated to her that, if Emi were to find out what Ashiya did to Rika, he feared she’d react aggressively to it.

“I don’t think Rika’s said anything to her. She told me she didn’t feel she could, really.”

“Ah...” Ashiya took a deep breath and fished his brand-new smartphone out of his pocket. “I apologize,” he said, choosing his words carefully for reasons Chiho couldn’t fathom. “I suppose Ms. Suzuki’s been forced to...look out for us in the Devil King’s Army. For our weaknesses.”

“Hee-hee-hee! You say that,” Chiho replied in a deliberately cheerful voice, “but it’s that weakness that attracts us all to you. Not that I want you weak forever, of course. On that front, at least as far as I can tell, you’re still a lot more sincere than Maou is.”

Ashiya looked down at her, a little surprised, then broke into a grin. “I suppose I have no right to chastise my liege. Honestly...”

Sasazuka station and the Jizo Street shopping center next to it were now in full-on Christmas mode. The flashy lights and decorations looked like something from a different world.

“I thought the whole human race was this disposable thing.”

Chiho wasn’t sure she had ever heard Ashiya let out such an unbelievably human sigh before. It was the first time Ashiya had ever sighed about anything he had done in the past.

“I have no regrets...but I still cannot get it off my mind. I keep worrying about how she has been since.”

“Oh, I don’t think Rika’s the type of woman to break down in tears just because her crush turned her down.”

“That is exactly why I am concerned. About...assorted things.”

Ashiya turned his eyes toward Chiho. He was absolutely right, and Chiho understood that all too well—but it was nothing either of them could solve just by thinking about it. So she decided to turn the topic toward something more accessible.

“Would you like me to talk to Maou about holding the Christmas party at Emi’s place?”

“No, I think it best if I bring it up, so everyone in the Devil King’s Army is on the same page as quickly as possible. You heard what Emeralda Etuva said.”

“All right. Maybe that’s for the better, yeah. Maou hasn’t really been at MgRonald when I’m there. Now that I think about it, we haven’t seen each other in a little while.”

“No? I suppose going full-time makes things more difficult, yes.”

They continued to casually chat about Maou and the restaurant. Before long, they were at Chiho’s door.

“Well, thank you for joining me. And if we do hold that party, you’re invited, of course.”

“I...”

“This might be kind of impertinent of me to say, Ashiya...”

“Hmm?”

“But I feel like both you and Rika are making a big mistake. I wasn’t there to see it, of course, but looking at you, I’m pretty sure about that.”

“Ah...”

Chiho gave him a big smile. “You really can’t chide Maou right now, I don’t think. Because maybe you think you’ve given an answer, but really you

haven't."

"Huh?!"

"And with that, thanks again. See you later!"

Leaving that epic riddle for the utterly confused Ashiya to ponder over, she went inside.

"I haven't...?"

Too serious-minded to understand what she meant, he went back home to the apartment—and immediately back out again to do the shopping he forgot about.



"Hmm... I don't know if I'll be able to make my own. I need to think about what we do with them afterward..."

The next day, back on the clock, Chiho gave a questioning look to the Christmas decorations dotted around the dining space.

"What's up, Chi? Something about the decorations bothering you?"

"Oh! Ms. Kisaki!"

Mayumi Kisaki, the manager, gave Chiho a curious look as she pointed at the golden tinsel right above their heads.

"Is it falling down?"

"No, I was just using some free time to think a bit about what makes for good Christmas decorations..."

"You should be using that free time to find work to do," Kisaki quipped, putting a hand to her hip for emphasis.

"Oh, um, sorry."

"So did any of the decorations look off to you when you did your rounds?"

"...No, ma'am."

"Good. Back to work, then. Marko's not here today, so we're a man down this shift. It's gonna be a packed dinner rush, so hang in there."

“Okay!”

Chiho followed her behind the counter, thankful that Kisasi didn’t gripe at her further about being idle.

“Where’s Mr. Maou today, by the way?”

“A MgRonald managed by a friend of mine. Different configuration but Marko’s already been there a few times, so today’s training ought to go pretty smoothly.”

“The one at Fushima-en?”

“Oh, you know it?”

The Mag at the Fushima-en theme park had enlisted Maou to fill in on several occasions before.

“MgRonald locations in theme parks during the season are pretty unique setups. The way I hear it, they’re always a part of the cycle during training periods like this.”

“The way you hear it? Don’t they tell you about the training schedule in advance?”

“...”

Kisasi paused, taking a quick look around the dining space. “This isn’t something I learned until I sent Marko off to training,” she solemnly replied, “but even if you undergo the full-time training, the chances of you becoming a salaried employee aren’t actually that high.”

“Really?”

“Only HR and the main office know what happens in training. Now that we’re past the initial portion where I’m accompanying him around, the managers like me only get told when a trainee’s coming, and that’s about it. Mizushima, my friend at the Fushima-en location, would normally be able to give him some inside advice along those lines, but there are so many home-office people involved right now that I doubt she’ll be able to.”

Kisasi looked down for a moment, deep in thought.

“I think Marko’s a great crewmember. But the way the office manager put it to me, great crewmembers aren’t always the kind of people that pass this training. I don’t really know what standards they’re looking for myself. I believe in Marko, of course, and I want him to try his best at it...” She took off her hat and mike for a moment, adjusting them. “But part of me kind of wants to show him a bigger world than this, you know...?”

“Ms. Kisaki?”

“...Ah, never mind. Now we’re really getting into nonwork-related topics.”

With that wavering statement, Kisaki returned to work.

“Weird,” Chiho said to herself. “It’s not like she doesn’t want Maou to be a full-timer, but...”

Kisaki knew full well how driven Maou was to earn that position. But the way she put it just now, the idea of Maou continuing up the McDonald career track seemed to give her genuine concern.

The dinner rush was exactly as hectic as Kisaki said it’d be, with Chiho barely having a moment to breathe until her shift ended at ten in the evening.

“Oh, you getting off now, Chiho?” Emilia asked.

“Yeah. Sorry to leave you, Yusa.”

Despite sharing most of her shift with Emi today, the two of them engaged in almost no conversation. Only when Chiho was seated in the break room, trying to gather up the energy to change out of her uniform, did Emi have a chance to chat a bit.

“Sure was crowded today, huh?”

“You said it,” Emi replied. “And it’s like every single delivery today’s on the far edge of our radius, too. I think Kawata’s been out driving in the cold all day, poor guy.”

“Yeah, he said working outside is pretty easy once you get used to it, but not in this weather, I bet.”

“Totally. And I don’t really see the point of the Christmas tree sticker on his helmet, either.”

These McDonald-logo holiday stickers, sent from the main office, looked quite literally tacked on. Kisaki was griping about them earlier, too.

“Oh, speaking of that, was Ms. Kisaki talking to you about decorations?”

“You saw that?” Chiho stood up and pointed at the Christmas tree drawn on the break room calendar. “I was just looking at the decorations, figuring out what kind we should get. Looking back, I kinda stopped paying attention to them once I stopped being a kid.”

“Ohh, I see. I bet Eme reminded you of them, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Emi smiled and took Chiho’s hand. “I’m sorry. I know Eme’s super gung ho about this.”

“Oh, no! I’m really looking forward to it. We don’t get to all eat together so much lately, and I dunno if Emeralda told you or not, but it’s kind of turning into a rally for our cause. It’s really exciting.”

“A rally?”

That sounded hyperbolic to Emi at first, until she realized what Chiho meant.

“Ohh, right, is that why Eme wanted to invited Laila and Rika?”

“Yep! We’re not gonna let go of our friends that easy!”

Chiho was aflame with enthusiasm. It was almost too bright for Emi to look at.

“So I thought I’d go out and do some handmade decorations and stuff, but it’s a little different from making stuff for the Tanabata festival.”

“Maybe. It’s not like we’re gonna go climb up a mountain and chop a tree down or anything.”

“Right. And things like tinsel and tree ornaments—I’d have no idea how to make those myself anyway, so we’re gonna need to invest a little bit of money, I think.”

“Do we really need to go all the way like that...?”

“Totally! We can’t take it easy on this if we want Alas Ramus to enjoy Christmas!” Now Chiho was burning even brighter. “But I don’t wanna go too

far, of course, or I really will wind up like Maou after Tanabata. So I was just thinking that I'd need to discuss it with someone if we're gonna spend money on it, and then Ms. Kisaki showed up."

She smiled awkwardly at Emi. Emi smiled back.

"Yeah, Tanabata was pretty rough..."

Not long after Suzuno came to Japan, Maou picked up a little bamboo decoration to celebrate the Tanabata festival in July from a regular customer who lived nearby. He decorated the MgRonald with it, and between that and the other crew-crafted decorations, the setup really wowed all the midsummer customers. But then Tanabata ended. This was a living bamboo plant, so they couldn't just abandon it. They allowed customers to snip off pieces of it before the festival ended, but most of the bamboo grass was still there after it was all over, so Maou wound up bringing it back to the apartment. He couldn't put it out with the garbage—the guy who gave it to him might notice—so it just sat on the outer corridor for a few days, getting in everyone's way. It eventually withered up despite Maou's best efforts, so he was forced to dispose of it in piecemeal fashion with the rest of the household trash over several days.

"I don't know what drives the Devil King to do stuff like that."

"Huh?"

"Like, is that good for the company, him playing it by ear like that?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, customers usually like the stuff he does, right? He owes a lot to Kisaki for letting him do it, of course, but..."

"Yeah..."

Emi sat down across from Chiho, her face serious. "But in a business like MgRonald, what people want the most is, you know, this homogeneous package, right? And the Devil King's bamboo stuff was pretty off script."

"Oh."

Chiho recalled back when the MgCafé space first opened in the Hatagaya station location. The coffee clearly tasted different depending on whether

Kisaki or Maou made it. Chiho didn't see what the fuss was—if the coffee's good, the coffee's good—but as Maou put it, if Kisaki wasn't around, he'd be forced to give customers what he knew was an inferior product.

“And you know what? I had a customer tell me the other day that Ms. Kisaki's coffee is going down in quality.”

“Really?!”

This was a shock to Chiho. There was no way Kisaki, of all people, would slack off on the job. Did this mean...?

“Right.” Emi nodded. “It didn't get worse; it had just gotten normal. On script. Akiko heard the same rumors I did about it. It was kind of funny, but...”

“Ms. Kisaki was trying to keep it homogeneous, too...?”

“That's what I'm thinking. I mean, I don't know for sure. It's not really something I can ask her point-blank. But looking back at Tanabata and how Maou handles his customers, I think he's been able to get away with a lot of it because he's got Kisaki watching out for him.”

The fact was that quite a few trainees never got a full-time job offer. And between Kisaki's ramblings, the “normal” coffee, and Maou's “nonhomogeneous” workplace habits, perhaps there were more obstacles to Maou's career efforts than Chiho thought. The company had its own vision of how to maximize profits, and there were standards behind that vision, which couldn't be quantified in monetary figures. To put it another way, MgRonald wanted to build a trust with customers, and that trust couldn't go too far above or below the norms that had been established over time. Maou and Kisaki's work was going above and beyond these norms, and it could even be affecting people's trust in the other MgRonalds around them. Being able to provide better service, but deliberately avoiding doing so, might seem terribly unfair at first glance. But if you don't put an upper limit in place, you might find people who inadvertently destroyed that trust and made things worse for others.

To Chiho, Maou pursuing a full-time job was directly correlated with him and Emi staying close to her for the foreseeable future. This new realization put a pall over her heart. Realizing this, Emi felt obligated to say something.

“You know, I want him to keep trying. I don’t want him to give up.”

“Oh?”

Chiho gave her an astonished look. It wasn’t like Emi to voice her support so clearly like that.

“I mean,” Emi replied with a nod, “if he gets that job, then he can stay devoted to that, Ente Isla can fully rebuild itself, and we’ll never have to worry about him invading or doing anything else stupid ever again.”

“Yusa...”

“And you know, sometimes I come over to his place with Alas Ramus to check up on him. Seeing if he’s doing anything dumb, I guess you could say. And every time I do... You know, I really want to be around next year. I want to celebrate Tanabata and Christmas again, with you, and Alas Ramus, and everyone else I hold dear. I mean...”

She stood up and headed toward her locker.

“I’m sick of living in this kill-or-be-killed world. So I’ve decided. I’m sorry, but we’re gonna have to make Alciel cry—in two different ways. First, he’ll be weeping for joy when Maou gets that job, and then he’ll be wailing when he realizes the demons will never get to take over our world.”

“...! S-so you’ll...!” Chiho half leaped out of her folding chair and embraced the still-changing Emi from behind. “You’ll do it, Yusa! You’ll really do it!”

“.....I can’t beat you, Chiho. It’s all happening just the way you want it. It drives me nuts.”

Her voice grew softer, her face still turned away.

“I...I’m not going to fight anymore.”



Marveling at the sight of Chiho and the rest of the group giving him astonished looks, Gabriel picked up where he left off about Ignora, Satanael, and Lucifer.

“Yeah, so Lucifer was born after we left our home planet, after Ignora found a way to make ourselves immortal. But it was still in the experimental stage at

that point—kind of like, *we're pretty sure we can do it*, know what I mean? You won't *really* know if you're invincible against disease or old age until at least a few years pass. But anyway, the lab found a way to deal with the pandemic, and the whole world was freakin' out big-time about that. And then, like I told ya at the start, people got into fights over the tech, and it pretty much ruined our planet."

"W-wait a moment! You are abridging yourself far too much!" Suzuno protested.

"Yes, I'm well awaaare that the discovery triggered a waaar, but what about it was enough to destroy the entire plaaanet?" Emeralda added.

"And besides, that doesn't explain how you wound up on Ente Isla's moon!" Chiho exclaimed.

Gabriel raised both hands to quiet his guests. "Chill, chill, chill! There were a lotta reasons for it, all right? But just like Crestia Bell said a second ago, there's nothing particularly surprising or noble about any of it. It's just a cavalcade of terrible events that proved just how stupid the human race really is."

When the pandemic first took root, the first nations to fall were the economically disadvantaged ones, with less of a developed military. Their populations weren't wiped out by the disease, but it did decimate their numbers enough that they couldn't continue as a going concern. As small as these nations were, their downfall wasn't something the world economy was prepared to absorb. The larger powers scrambled to preserve their own finances, and as Ignora and her team continued their research, tensions across borders rapidly approached the breaking point.

Once word got out that the lunar lab's work might provide a solution to the disease, many nations sent people and money to the facility, in hopes of reaping the benefits ahead of anyone else. The lunar base itself was a melting pot of sorts, with Ignora, Satanael, Camael, Raguel, Gabriel, Sariel, and Laila all from different nations, but they had grouped together to try to save the planet.

Once the day came when Ignora's results were formally announced, their home planet began to crack along its national borders. Her country attempted to summon her back home, as did Satanael's. Anyone even slightly involved

with the immortality research received similar orders. But from the researchers' point of view, their work had only just begun; it wasn't anything they could put to practical use yet, so going home right now was unthinkable. Satanael and Sariel served as their representatives, trying their best to negotiate with each nation, but their efforts failed to bear fruit.

In fact, the world began to lodge all kinds of shortsighted accusations at the international group formed to manage the lunar base. All sorts of loony stories started going around—researchers being held against their will on the moon, spies being sent to kidnap team members, countries laying claims to the spaceport that all the lab's goods went through. Everyone wanted the immortality formula, no matter how foolish their efforts made them look.

Some nations even tried to duplicate the research themselves, using the information released by the facility and moon colony to the press as a guide. This led to acts of terrorism, carried out by people who believed that one nation hoarding its research was a crime against humanity. This research was supposed to save the world; instead, it plunged the world into chaos—and the pandemic kept spreading the entire time.

The harmful particles in the air that had covered Gabriel's home planet triggered several symptoms at the same time, in multiple areas of the body at once. If someone caught it, unless the victim was very lucky, there was no saving them. Once these particles made their way in through the respiratory organs, they blocked both the body's digestive functions and the nervous system's ability to send and receive signals. If they struck the lungs, they would drastically impact the victim's breathing ability; if they got into the blood, they would turn into a substance that caused blockages and cardiac issues.

This disease struck people in different ways. Some could live out their entire natural lives without being affected, while others would present multiple symptoms after a single, tiny exposure. Most traditional medical approaches were quickly exhausted. All in all, over 30 percent of the population caught this disease, and given that it killed over half its victims within five years, the effects on the world's average life span and population were devastating. By the time the immortality research began to look like the "real thing," so to speak, the human race was willing to fight to the death with one another for even an

incomplete version of the findings.

Leaving the planet wasn't an option. Colonies on the moon and elsewhere were accessible only to the highest reaches of society, and there was no guarantee that the harmful particles littered across the star system wouldn't get you there, too. The disease even took a few people in Ignora's laboratory, forcing Gabriel to sound the hazard alarm multiple times.

Even so, these were still the good old days—back when the rule of law still prevailed among the larger nations.

The lunar researchers did their best, finding ways to extend the deadline on their return home while advancing their immortality research. However, the lab was facing more and more obstacles that had nothing to do with academic or technical issues. As chief of security, Gabriel was faced with the grim task of shifting the directive for his personnel from controlling outside threats to actively fighting them off.

Still, Ignora, Satanael, Laila, Camael, and everyone else involved with the research worked tirelessly on, believing that all this strife would come to an end once their job was complete. Facing up to the threat of kidnapping or attacks from foreign nations—or even worse, their own—they went over to the giant tree on the moon to gather samples many times, figuring out not only how to become immortal but how to mass-produce the miracle. In the midst of this storm—none of it their fault—their only support was their fervent desire to save the human race.

Then one day, it happened: Gabriel learned about it from Laila first—Ignora and Satanael were engaged in a heated argument.

“This child is the greatest hope the human race has,” Satanael shouted. “The dawn of a new age, one that will bring the light of new dreams to our imperiled future!”

Ignora refused to back down. “But it's complete! It's finally completed! I've done it! We can save the world now!”

As out of the loop as he was, Gabriel knew what this meant. Immortality was near.

Then all of a sudden, a warning alarm sounded off across the entire facility. Gabriel sent a message out asking what was up; he was greeted by the screams of the dying.

“And y’know what they said? ‘It’s Caiel and Sikeena! They’re here! They’re mowing us down! Get everyone out of here!’”



**THE
DEVIL
KING IS
OUT OF
THE
OFFICE
(4)**

THE DEVIL KING IS OUT OF THE OFFICE (4)

Just as Emeralda was heading off to MgRonald to eat dinner and snoop on Emi and Chiho, a thundering roar from inside Castle Ereniem sent the pigeons roosting in the building's unique steeple flying into the air.

"I swear to you, I hate every man, woman, and child in this country!!" The large man leaped out from his tiny desk, paperwork thrown into the air like sparks from a campfire.

"Enough, Albert. People have been sent to tribunals for less reason than this tirade of yours."

Albert Ende, by far the largest of the Hero's quest companions, was raging like a hungry predator, darting from here and there as he fumed to himself—but the woman with him didn't bat an eye.

"Oh, shut up, Hazel! I hate you, too! I can't take this any longer!!"

This wasn't a battlefield, so she was in civilian clothing, but the dignity she exuded was impossible to hide. It was General Hazel Rumack, chief director of the Federated Order of the Five Continents and the de facto leader of Saint Aile's military branch.

"No wonder Eme never wants to come back! I've never seen a bunch of people as malicious and treacherous as you idiots from the West!"

"And what will telling me that accomplish, Director Ende?"

Rumack's icy rejoinder was met with more hellfire from Albert. "'Director' now, is it? All right, yes! I *am* acting director of the Holy Magic Administrative Institute! But I can't sub in for a real court sorcerer, all right? And yet I have all these pricks at the Institute going on like *ooh, Emeralda would have handled it in the blink of an eye* with one another, right in front of my face so I can hear it! If you don't like me that much, I'll happily resign right this minute! Just get that

broccoli-haired li'l girl back for me! It's not like I'm sitting on this ridiculously tiny chair because I think it's comfortable!"

"So idle chatter from the sorcerers is enough to set you off? You are rather more thin-skinned than I thought." Rumack raised a surprised eyebrow. "I'll admit to being biased, but the sorcerers and researchers here live in their own little world, you could say. You wouldn't be so angry if you just accepted that dealing with them will occasionally rankle you."

"Oh, I am well past that point, thank you! Why do I have to scrutinize this research report analyzing the density of holy force in the atmosphere?! And that'd be one thing, but why do I need those snot-nosed brats sniffing their noses at me the whole time?! *Oooh, look at this, you messed it up again*—shut up already!"

"You have quite a bit of pent-up rage, I see. By the way, I've come here because one of my students is crying at me about how he's too scared to ask you about the status of his draft report."

"Yeah? You talkin' about the kid from that noble family with the crazy, fancy-pants armor on? I saw him today! If he thinks that shiny armor would ever save his ass in the battlefield, he's got another thing comin', lemme tell you! The enemy would aim their holy magic at him first!"

"Their mission is not to serve as frontline troops. They serve as decoration for the imperial castle. They polish up that armor until you can see your reflection in it. That armor won't face a blade or an arrow once in its life. They are paid to look fancy, to make the emperor's castle shine so brightly that royal guests can see them a mile away."

"Oh, well, isn't that nice?! And I bet they get paid a hell of a lot more than the grunts duking it out in the Central Continent with the demons and the other islands! This entire world's got its priorities screwed up!"

"You will find no disagreement from me on that point, but would you want to spend your life in their armored boots? You would find it powerfully boring in short order."

"Yeah, and they'd probably never even notice how boring their lives are! And if they don't, I sure as hell ain't gonna tell them!"

“Oh, brother...”

Rumack gave the fuming Albert a look, then wadded up the research draft request in her hand and tossed it in the wastebasket next to the desk.

The Holy Magic Administrative Institute, led by the sorcerer Emeralda Etuva, was a government office under direct control of the emperor. On paper, it was an independent entity from the knight corps, and thus requests from the knights had to be submitted in document form. So basically, what had just happened was Rumack formally asking Albert for her student’s draft back and Albert refusing.

“Would you like to go for a drink, maybe? I imagine the walls of the city are too constricting for someone from the great expanses of the North like you. Perhaps a walk around the castle town would do you good.”

“Sure, if you don’t mind me ditching this job for good!”

“That would be rather more troublesome than I prefer. If you run from us, you will be a wanted man across the empire.”

Rumack didn’t think he would actually go through with it. But for safety’s sake, the place she chose for this drink was her own office—an unadorned, almost barren little room, not at all befitting a woman of her stature.

“Wow. Exciting place.”

“Sometimes, you see, being a woman can be a weakness in itself. I am not that much of a patriot for my own people.”

The only real décor to speak of was a suit of ceremonial armor, each part of it polished and sharpened to a fine edge.

“I’ve obtained something uncommon for us to drink. In terms of looks, I cannot recommend it to those with more refined tastes, but as someone who has traveled the world as much as you have, I would not hesitate to let you try it.”

“Oh?”

Rumack fished a hand into the nether regions of a bookshelf, producing a bottle from it. Albert’s eyes burst open.

“Southern Island liquor?”

“I thought you would recognize it.”

The large, nondescript bottle of liquor was infused with the full body of a gigantic, grotesque-looking lizard. It was a familiar sight to Albert.

“They say only the aristocracy in the desert lands know how to make this. Have you had it before?”

“I didn’t know they made liquor out of those guys. Y’know, once you finish this bottle, you can chop up the lizard inside, sprinkle some spices on it, roast it on skewers over a charcoal fire, and damn, you got yourself a good dinner.”

The thin, light-copper liquid poured into Rumack’s silver tumblers practically reeked of alcohol. But take a swig, and it had a surprisingly soft touch upon the tongue, as if gently caressing you from the throat to the stomach. It was habit-forming.

“Not bad.”

“There, see?” Rumack poured another serving into Albert’s tumbler glass. “So, what else did Emeralda tell you?”

“Huh?”

“She couldn’t have extended her stay in that other world on a whim.”

“Heh. You’d be surprised. I’m sure all she really wants is a couple more nice meals in her belly before she leaves. I guess there’s some kinda religious holiday coming up, and it features lots of dishes that’re only served around that time.”

Albert took a lighter sip this time, sloshing the liquid around a bit on his tongue.

“If that’s what she really wants, then what was her excuse for it?”

“Ah...” Albert slumped into the room’s sofa, despite not being invited to. “It sounds like Emilia wants to study at a university. One over there, I mean. And Eme wants to help her out.”

“Oh!” Rumack’s eyes opened wide. The concept sounded fun to her. “So this... Japan, allows common women like her access to higher education?”

Such institutions were open only to nobility—male nobility—in Saint Aile. The Church’s religious school, despite claims of being open to the general populace regardless of upbringing, had largely devolved into someplace for the less powerful of young aristocrats to go to. Its student body had a bunch of fancy family names and little else, so if a commoner were to blunder their way into class, they would quickly be ostracized and bullied right back out.

“Your upbringing doesn’t matter, apparently. They charge a lot of money, though.”

“They do? I suppose we can’t fund her from here, then.”

Albert looked at the surface of the liquid in his glass. “Ahh, even if there was a money changer, something tells me Emilia wouldn’t accept our charity anyway.”

“True enough,” Rumack replied, smiling a little as the almost-choking scent of alcohol wafted up from her tumbler. “If we can make the Hero Emilia owe us a favor, that could give us an advantage in any possible situation we run into in Ente Isla. Perhaps she intends never to return at all, just for that reason.”

“You look happy about that.”

“Of course. I don’t want her to come back.”

Albert knew all too well that Rumack really meant it.

“The events in Heavensky have been reported far more widely than I expected.”

These events, of course, meant the news that both Emilia the Hero and Alciel the Great Demon General were still alive.

“Emilia and Alciel,” she continued, “are no longer in Ente Isla, but they were both seen by throngs of people. Word of this will grow diluted the farther away it spreads, but regardless, there will always be a sommelier or two who can sniff out what it really is.”

“But do you think any of them will realize there’s another world involved?”

“The possibility of that is well beyond zero, I would say. Both demons and angels actually exist, after all.”

Rumack herself was a devout member of the Church but not enough of a zealot to believe that the force of her god had a hand in everything that occurred in the world.

“If Emilia came back here, you know she’d never be happy. We could perhaps rebuild Sloane and have the knights ensure it remains a secret, but it would be all too easy to have word leak out about it. The mere existence of the name Emilia Justina will forever have to come at the cost of something else.”

Emilia the Hero was born in the Saint Aile village of Sloane. Ever since she’d defeated Lucifer’s forces and became a savior to humanity, Saint Aile had used her name for their own political, financial, and military advantage. This was fine back when mankind, united by a common foe in the Devil King’s Army, had Saint Aile perform most of the heavy lifting in the war. Now, without that common foe, things were different. While the other nations and continents were aware that Emilia was from Saint Aile, it was now Saint Aile struggling to figure out Emilia’s treatment and affiliation.

Sloane was considered to be a satellite settlement under the jurisdiction of the walled city of Cassius. The previous prince who ruled over Cassius’s domain was part of Pippin Magnus’s faction, and after the events in Heavensky caused Pippin’s downfall, this prince was also forced to take the heat. But the prince’s family hadn’t disappeared. Pippin’s faction no longer had a public presence, but there were countless numbers of strategic marriages and other alliances designed to keep the prince’s line going. Several of the people involved wielded great power in other regions or nations; attempting to force them all out would just invite rancor from other nobles in and around Cassius.

Currently, a prince loyal to Rumack from the family had been appointed to run the region, ensuring that the Cassius name continued and the previous prince’s crimes were atoned for. If Emilia decided to return to Sloane and live a quiet life outside the public eye, she’d still be the strongest human being in the world. Her mere presence would give the ruler of Cassius overwhelming amounts of power. And while people using her good name were one thing, some of the rank-and-file nobles would no doubt attempt to use her dignity as a woman to gain clout with the ruling prince, as well as Rumack and the Saint Aile emperor.

In short, there were no doubt at least a few greedy nobles in Cassius who wanted to marry Emilia to boost their own name. And there was no way Emilia's disposition would allow that.

"I suppose she'll have to remain single her whole life, hmm? Like me."

"Oh? I heard a rumor that the crown prince himself is after the Hazel Rumack name."

"Hmm. Well. I am not going to sit here and say 'I don't want a man who doesn't want me for myself' like a little girl, but I doubt I could ever love some would-be big shot whose greatest talent is polishing his armor."

"Ha! That'd earn you more than just a tribunal. Insulting the imperial court could merit the death penalty."

Albert loved how Rumack never minced words.

"If Emilia ever fell in love with a commoner, I'm sure he would be dead under mysterious circumstances before long. Marrying into the aristocracy would plunge her straight into political strife. Someone with a nice suit of armor wouldn't be near enough for her."

"Heroes only truly exist in legend after all, I s'pose."

"You said it," Rumack replied as she corked the bottle of lizard wine and hid it in a corner of the shelf. "The only other way is if she was born into a world that didn't know what Heroes were at all. If there's anything I can do for her right now, I suppose it'd just be to ensure she doesn't regret saving Ente Isla."

"You think she's that narrow-minded?"

"When you grow up, you know, you start noticing things you didn't as a child."

Rumack may have looked young, but she was actually old enough that her current government position wasn't unusual at all for her age. She was closer to Albert in years than Emeralda. That was why, even more than Emeralda, she felt incredibly obliged to this woman over a decade younger than her, forced to carry the entire world on her shoulders. Her work responsibility, and the distance kept between her and Emilia, prevented her from expressing it very

often.

“If I could find a way to create a world Emilia could be happy in,” she continued, “I gladly would. But I doubt that’s what she wants from me. I imagine she thinks of me as just another uniformed officer, ready to take advantage of her good name whenever the opportunity presents itself.”

Albert gave an ill-intentioned grin as Rumack glumly averted her eyes. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. Emilia has people over there who don’t care about her obligations here. They’re willing to listen to Emilia gripe on end about them.”

“Hmph... And who are you referring to?”

“Mm?”

Albert looked down at Rumack’s curious eyes. He sighed, realizing what she wanted him to say.

“Well, the girl Chiho Sasaki and the young woman Rika Suzuki to name two. They are both coworkers of Emilia’s. Crestia Bell, too, has proven a reliable friend. She belongs to the Church, but she’s never pushy about it, which she likes.”

“Haaah...” Rumack visibly winced at Albert’s reply, no longer hiding her dissatisfaction. “This is so silly! What’s with all that stuff?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is exactly why people are bad-mouthing you up and down the Institute! If I’m here feeding you liquor, the least you could do is entertain me!”

How unfair could you get?

“Pfft. You guys are just gonna pick on me either way. Me, I just gotta work things out so it’s as little extra stress on me as possible.”

“Ha! Emeraldal’s taught you too well, I see. You pick up on things so quickly, it’s honestly boring.”

“Whether I do or not, I’d figure that makes me more approachable than some whiny lady.”

“I suppose we’ll both have to be happy staying single our whole lives.”

“The nomads of the North ain’t into settling down. Thanks for the fancy booze. I’ll put that draft you mentioned on the top of my to-do pile.”

Leaving Rumack to stew in her own juices, Albert marched right back to the Holy Magic Administrative Institute. As he did, he looked through the windows that dotted the hallways, staring at the people in the holy city below. It made him reflect on how people could lead such simple lives, and yet the world they lived in was so incredibly complicated.

“...Ugh. Look at me. That fancy stuff didn’t get me *that* drunk.”

Saint Aile shouldn’t have been particularly tough for Emilia to live in. There were many places outside of Sloane where she could live in relatively secure hiding, and if she went and made a name for herself in Japan, then she’d be shackled to that place in her own way.

“Compared to that, I suppose the Devil King’s got it pretty easy, huh?”

Albert had faced off against many demons in his life, not least of which was Adramelech, leader of the enemy forces in the Northern Island. He knew demons weren’t a pack of brainless animals. They had their own society, and their king no doubt had his own issues to deal with—but when it came to life in Japan, the Hero Emilia and Satan the Devil King took off from two different starting lines.

Satan had appeared in Ente Isla as king, and he fled to Japan as a king. Emilia became the Hero through no desire of her own, and when she attempted to live up to the responsibility that brought, she was cast adrift before washing up in Japan. Satan never fulfilled his dream of conquering the world, but he was still walking down a path he chose for himself. Emilia saw world peace in her own time, but it was nothing she had ever volunteered for.

Albert didn’t know if Emeralda picked up on that difference, but given how fervently she wanted to support Emilia’s dreams, she must have understood that incontrovertible fact. One often heard tales of people who went down roads they never expected to take, only to find a different sort of ideal for themselves at the end—and that was likely the only way Emilia would ever find happiness now. Just as Rumack estimated, there was no place left for Emilia in

Ente Isla. The mere existence of her name was forever going to hurt someone.

“So she should just play at being the Hero and bicker with the Devil King in Japan forever?”

Something about that didn’t sit well with him. The world owed Emilia a tremendous debt. The least it could do was repay the favor a little bit. Where did this world get off, so hell-bent on trying to milk her for everything she had?

“Not that I want the world to fall apart or nothin’, but...”

The world just had to learn not to rely on Emilia too much. With both her and the Devil King now in Japan, it had proven more than capable of that.

“A bit like a kid left at home alone who wants his parents to spoil him when they get back, eh...?”

While the Hero and Devil King were away, Ente Isla had somehow managed to keep itself going. But if the guardian they relied on were to return, it’d be just like that child, succumbing to its own greedy desires. If the Devil King were to join her, the world truly would be beyond help—and unfortunately for everyone on it, the god they’d turn to for help was starting to look pretty doubtful herself.

Just as the news of Emilia and Alciel’s return had spread worldwide, word was starting to leak out about the betrayal of Olba Meiyer, one of the six archbishops who led the Church. Church leaders, ex-Pippin loyalists, the Eastern Island politicians who allowed Olba to guide the demons in their directions—potential sources for these leaks lay everywhere.

“Peace is harder than it sounds, huh? It’s a lot simpler to keep fightin’.”

Albert griped to himself all the way back to the bleak, depressing Holy Magic Administrative Institute. He fished out the wadded-up draft request from the waste bin.

“Hmm... A draft request to send researchers out to investigate holy force densities around holy areas... Oh, right, I heard about this. Umm, I think it talks about the Church around here...”

Albert leafed through his pile of papers—all business he had been forced to

delay over the past few days—until he found the draft he was looking for.

“Here we go. I had put this off ’til later because they were asking for thirty researchers or some such nonsense. What’re they, crazy? We’re already short on people. Why’d they throw a proposal with the Church’s fingerprints all over it to us, of all people?”

It appeared to be a proposal to investigate the source of the holy water taken from Sankt Ignoreido, the holy land and headquarters of the Church. This water was used for ceremonies, the holy power infused within making it useful for treatment in Church hospitals, but the quality of this liquid had fallen as of late. Relations between the Church and Emeraldal’s Institute had deteriorated since the show trial she was subjected to, but Saint Aile was still in close contact with them, so the relationship hadn’t been cut off entirely. A lot of Institute researchers still bore a grudge against the Church, however, so Albert taking up a Church job while Emeraldal was gone would no doubt hurt his reputation among them even further.

“Ugggghhhh... Get your ass back here, Eme...”

A decline in holy water quality directly affected people’s lives. It could even affect the dignity of the Church itself. The Institute (and by extension, Saint Aile) solving a problem that the Church’s own scholars couldn’t handle would earn them some useful brownie points, which is why this issue was now on Albert’s desk.

“A striking decline in the water’s holy force content, though...? Maybe there was a cave-in somewhere and the underground streams changed direction or something?”

Albert raised an eyebrow as he affixed the Institute’s formal seal of approval on the request and began listing the people he’d ask to join the project.



“Caiel and Sikeena’s objective was to eradicate the immortality tech. They went around the place, destroying any data and equipment we had related to that project. No way any regular security force coulda handled them, right? It wound up being me, Satanael, and Camaelas the last line of defense against ’em. It was an insane battle! If we didn’t have Satanael around, with his

understanding of their DNA structure, that probably woulda been the end for me.”

Gabriel visibly shivered. For the first time, Chiho sensed that this angel, who breezily fought off the Hero and Devil King at the same time, could feel genuine fear after all.

“But didn’t Caiel and Sikeena help Ignora with that research? Why would they do that?”

It was an obvious question, one that Gabriel had anticipated in advance.

“They didn’t think Ignora was as talented as she turned out to be. They didn’t expect lending her a hand would lead to this crazy discovery. Maybe they figured she’d stumble upon a more direct solution to the pandemic, a vaccine or something, long before then. But to the Sephirah children, making immortality into a real-life thing kinda put the whole human race in danger.”

The Sephirah interfered with the course of human history only when mankind faced a danger it couldn’t handle by itself. The lack of progress fending off the pandemic definitely counted as that. But the Sephirah’s involvement inadvertently led to humanity discovering immortality—in a way, an even graver threat.

“Like, think about it, ’kay? If we all woke up tomorrow and people just stopped dying, what’d happen to the world?”

A population explosion. Worldwide famines. Territorial wars. All that and more flashed across the minds of everyone at the table. That wasn’t what Caiel and Sikeena lent a hand to Ignora for—and that was why they raided the lab: to eliminate this mortal danger from the universe.

“But you know what happened? Satanael and Camael did it. After this long protracted battle, they actually beat them. Maybe it was because they both had a grip on Caiel’s and Sikeena’s DNA. I dunno. But that’s how it turned out, and that’s when Ente Isla’s troubles began.”

The lunar laboratory had fended off the threat from the Sephirah children. But now it was facing a completely different threat from its home planet. All the nations down there had independently reached the same conclusion—this

attack on the lab was being carried out by one country or another, in hopes of locking up the research results for themselves.

Soon, it resulted in war—one that ultimately never ended. Every nation deployed troops to the lab, under the pretext of keeping their own researchers secure. On the ground, in the air, in space, and on the lunar surface, they all set about killing one another. The researchers and colonists, faced with a sight they never expected to see when they finally reached their research goals, decided that drastic measures had to be taken. Those measures: full-scale evacuation.

If the lab was going to be broken into little pieces by these nations, the immortality tech would be lost forever. The home planet had gone well and truly insane; the lab could try pleading with the nations all it wanted, but at this rate, its research was as good as lost already.

Thus, Ignora and her team waved good-bye. Gabriel joined them as head of security, along with a portion of the colonists. All the colony cities were set up to be operable as mobile space bases in case of emergency—a measure set up by treaties in the early stages of space development, so that no single country could seize them all. In the end, this measure allowed the colonies to flee from their home planet forever.

All the world's armies could do was look on resentfully as the colonies took off from the moon. Attacking them might cause them to lose the immortality tech forever; anyone who tried it would face the wrath of the entire rest of the world.

“But even at that point,” Laila said with a sad shake of the head, “the nations of our world couldn’t stop fighting. They told us not to run, to side with this or that nation. They never truly understood what we were running from.”

Filled with despair for her native planet, Ignora set a course for the colonies beyond the event horizon.

“And just as the planet and its moon had disappeared from view, our holy force scanner picked up an unexpected reaction. Our ultra-long-range optical telescope picked up that old, withered tree—slowly separating itself from the moon.”

“Mankind has ended.”

“I am sorry, Da’at.”

Nobody was around to hear those words exchanged by Caiel and Sikeena, captured after their bloody battle, before they disappeared into thin air.

It was only later when Ignora and the rest of the lunar colonists and researchers found out via their long-range scanners that all the other colonies, as well as the main cities of their home planet, had vanished. This they found out a mere ten years later, as they were floating around the outskirts of their star system. Just like that, they had lost any connection to the universe—and all that remained was a long, so unimaginably long era of wandering across space.

“So,” said Laila, “as I think you can see now, our wandering ended when we came across the moon of Ente Isla. Our holy force scanners picked up the same waveforms from it that we saw with the tree on the dark side of our own moon.”

“And that...!!”

Emi gasped. Laila gravely nodded at her.

“And right next to that moon, we saw a world exactly like our own. So we chose it as our second homeland. But at the time...Ente Isla still had only one moon.”

**THE
TEEN
AND THE
CALL-CENTER
LADY
RING
IN THE
NEW YEAR
CONT'D**



THE TEEN AND THE CALL-CENTER LADY RING IN THE NEW YEAR

CONT'D

“Why...? Why did it have to turn out like this?!”

Rika's shouts, after Chiho finally told her the whole story, echoed their despondent way across the empty shell of Room 201.

“We were all gonna spend Christmas here for Alas Ramus! We weren't gonna worry about all of the baggage from Emi's mom's! We'd forget about fighting, we'd leave the people in heaven and Ente Isla to deal with their own crap, and we'd worry about our own lives for a change! What happened to all of that?!”

“The Christmas party,” Chiho replied, not a shred of emotion on her face, “never happened.”

“Huh...?”

“Emeralda went home first. Then Suzuno. Yusa and Alas Ramus were next, along with Nord and Laila. Maou, Ashiya, Urushihara, and Acieth went last. That was on the twenty-sixth.”

“The twenty-sixth? You were talking about holding the party then...”

“We were counting more on the twenty-third, actually, since it's a national holiday.”

The birthday of Japan's currently reigning emperor was always treated as a national holiday. In the case of Emperor Akihito, that date is December twenty-third.

“We decided to go with that since it'd be easier for you to join us, Rika. But they all decided to go back to Ente Isla before the twenty-third rolled around, and...three days later...”

“They left you behind?”

“...Yeah.”

“But that... That’s terrible! I thought you were all supposed to be friends! And you didn’t even hold the party you were all planning?!”

“I couldn’t do anything about it. About anything. One statement was all it took to turn it all on its head. Something so strong it even made Urushihara resolve to fight it out.”

“But... But they all had their own motivations, their own things they wanted to do. So why...?”

The stone-faced Chiho cracked a light smile. “We couldn’t win. None of us could. Not when *that’s* what we were told.”

“Chiho...”

What could’ve transpired to make Chiho—a girl far stronger than Rika, someone who had dealt with these visitors for so much longer than her—concede so easily like this? Rika couldn’t even begin to guess what had happened.

“Laila was pretty surprised about it. You know, Maou and Yusa had been so stubborn with her for so long, and then they both just said yes. She kept asking them if they were sure about it—her and Gabriel. And not just those two. She asked me; she asked Ashiya, Urushihara, Suzuno, Emerald, Nord; she wanted to be sure we were all on board for it. And we said yes. *I* said yes. I had to. I wasn’t forced to. That was just the only thing I could’ve said to her.”

The fact that Chiho offered no resistance whatsoever was a shock to Rika.

“It was that convincing?”

“And I couldn’t choose to fight with them, either. I don’t have that kind of power.”

Chiho sighed slightly, her breath given a white sheen by the cold of the room.

“I apologize that it took this long to tell you, Rika.”

“...It’s all right. I had the worst trouble facing up to Emi and Ashiya anyway, and I had some family stuff pop up back at home, so I was stuck over there for a while...but... But wow, they’re gone, huh? I sent Emi a New Year’s card, you

know.”

Emi mentioned that she missed her chance to send any New Year’s greetings last year, so Rika went through the trouble of making a handwritten card and sending it to Emi’s place from Kobe. That card was now undoubtedly shivering inside her mailbox at Urban Heights Eifukucho.

“So...when’ll we see them again? This isn’t, like, *it*, is it?”

“...Um.”

“They’re off to defeat this god...um, Ignora, right? That’s gonna take a really long time, isn’t it? But it’s not like it’ll be just constant fighting day after day, don’t you think? They have to be able to make it back here sometime.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know then, either—like, what’s waiting for them over there, so...”

Chiho unsteadily rose up. Rika was still sprawled out on the floor, unable to stand. She couldn’t accept this—but it really had been the reality all along. There were these people who never should’ve been here, and now they were back where they belonged, on their own free will. Neither Rika nor Chiho had any right to stop them.

There was no man named Sadao Maou in this world. There was no woman named Emi Yusa, either. Everyone was back in the world where they belonged, in the form they should’ve been in all along.

“So...”

The world where they belonged.

“So I really can’t accept that. We can’t wait that long, can we?”

Rika, her heart ruled by a great emptiness now that the world was back to what it *should* have been, looked up at Chiho.

“I don’t know how long it’ll take,” she spat out, her voice dry and scratchy. “I don’t know if they’ll ever come back alive. We can’t wait for a battle like that to end.”

She undid the scarf covering the bottom of her head and tossed it on the floor.

“Ch-Chiho?”

And that wasn’t all. She removed the bag she had on her back, threw her coat down on the ground, then ran over to the front door and put on her shoes, running back with Rika’s shoes as well.

“Chiho? What’re you doing?!”

“Rika! Put these on! Right here!”

“H-here? What, on the tatami mats? Hey, Chiho, get ahold of yourself...”

“This is something I just can’t put up with. I can’t wait that long. I couldn’t wait that long. Could you, Rika?!”

“Wh-whaaa?!”

Now Rika was being jostled around by the collar, Chiho almost pulling her up off the floor.

“Maou never answered me! I told him months and months ago that I loved him! I said just a bit ago to give me the answer if he thinks he has one! And then he forgot all about it and let that single statement drive him to go! How long am I supposed to even wait?! Don’t you think he could’ve at least given me a timeline?! Despite all this love I have for him?!”

“Huh? Huh? Wha—?!”

“You have to agree with me, don’t you, Rika?! You never got an answer from Ashiya, either! Is this how you want everything to end? That can’t be good for you, can it?! You want an answer, right?!”

“Uh? A-an answer? You mean about my love? But I already, uh—”

“Did Ashiya say that he *didn’t* like you, Rika?!”

“Uhh? Whaaat?”

“Did he say *I love you*, or *I hate you*, or *Let’s be a couple*, or *I can’t be with you*, or *Let’s just be friends*, or *I don’t wanna see you again*?! He didn’t, did he?! You were crying, weren’t you, Rika?! If he made you cry, the *least* he could’ve said was something like *Don’t come back here again* or whatever! They’re always like this! And maybe they see it as a way of being nice, but they’ve kept

it up for so long, it's not convincing anyone anymore! Is it?! Ashiya went off without even telling you what his feelings were, didn't he?! Doesn't that annoy you at all?!"

"I, um, uhh..."

"If he can't stand to be around you, why can't he just say that?! Instead he just phrases it to try and make *you* give up instead! That's so unfair! And after all this time, Maou's still like *I don't know, I don't know*! Then what does he know?!"

"C-calm down, Chiho! What's going on with you?! Why are you...?"

"Look, I'm past being the nice little Chi who sits on her bed, hands on knees, waiting for everyone important to her to get back here! I'm past it! That's what I've decided! So!"

She released Rika, then reached down toward the edge of one of the tatami mats lining the floor.

"Hnnnnnng!"

"Ch-Chiho?! What're you doing?!"

"I'm ripping this tatami mat off! Help me out!"

"O-okay?!"

Rika lent a hand to Chiho, not a single clue what it was all leading to. The mat came up easily...and revealed nothing but bare floorboards. It wasn't hiding anything—she still had no idea what Chiho was doing. But something was odd about these floors. It was almost too clean. The bottom sides of tatami mats like this one usually grew dusty over time, the baseboards getting stained and cracking here or there. Meanwhile, the floor here almost looked freshly polished.

"We can't fight," a determined Chiho declared. "We can't fly, we can't swing a sword, and we can't breathe fire. If we fall off a building, we die. If the expressway overpass falls down, I can't fix it. But...I know how to cook!"

"Huh?"

"I know what Maou likes to eat! Him, and Yusa, and Ashiya, and Urushihara,

and Suzuno, and Alas Ramus, too! I know what they don't like! I know how to clean! I'm learning how to sew! If someone has a problem, I can listen to them whine for a while! If I have my phone with me, I can cast an Idea Link! And I can swear up and down that I was a close friend of everyone who ever set foot here in Room 201! So!"

Then Chiho took something out of her pocket. It was small and light in her hand, emitting a faint glow, and she lifted it high into the air and smashed it against the bare floor.

"Agh!!"

Rika instinctively covered her face. The floorboards suddenly lit up, the surface shimmering like an oily film. The light grew stronger and stronger, forcing Rika to shut her eyes.

"What—what is that, Chiho?!"

"Wait just a minute. The border surface will stabilize enough in a moment to connect to the other side."

"Connect to... Ahh?!"

A final, intense flash of light coursed across the room, then subsided.

"You can open your eyes now."

"Wh-what on...?"

At Chiho's signal, Rika put her hand down. For a few moments, she stared, astonished, at where the floorboards used to be. Now it was a spring of light, pulsing shades of white and blue. The remaining five tatami mats in the room, cracked and sun bleached, were now home to an almost divine well of eerie light. It was so beyond the realm of common sense, Rika couldn't even begin to explain it.

"I think you've seen this at least once before, Rika. In Ueno."

"Ueno... Ah!!" Rika gasped, realizing what this meant. "Suzuno, in front of the *Gates of Hell* sculpture... So this is..."

"Right." Chiho nodded, her voice a little shaky. "This is a Gate. A magical tunnel connecting one world to another across the stars."

It was the same path to another world that Maou and Suzuno opened over in Ueno Park, on their way to saving Emi and Ashiya.

“Here we go.”

“Huh?”

Before she knew it, Rika found her hand being taken. Somewhere along the line, Chiho had picked up the bag she had dropped on the floor, along with Rika’s satchel. Her eyes were pointed right on the light beneath her.

“W-wait! Go where?”

“You don’t get carsick or anything, do you, Rika? It was pretty rough on me the first time, so I brought some antinausea pills with me. If you think you need them along the way, go ahead and take them, okay?”

“Along the way? I... What? What are you talking about, Chiho? Like, really, where are we...”

“Here we go!”

“Where are we *goooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooiing?!’*”

An unexpectedly strong force was dragging Rika, hand in hand with Chiho, right into the spring of light. The floor that was there turned into an empty space, no foothold in sight. Rika was struck with fear as she plunged into what felt like thin air.

The falling seemed to go on forever until, just for a single moment, she felt something lightly patting her tensed shoulders. Considering they were falling, it didn’t really seem like there was anything to land on. There wasn’t any wind or anything else to indicate how fast the fall was. Gingerly, she opened her eyes, only to find something she had seen in movies and photos before, but that almost nobody would ever get a chance to truly see in person.

“No way.”

It was Earth, a giant blue planet before her eyes—and now that Rika discovered she was floating in space, she realized it was rapidly shrinking. The Earth, the moon, the light of the sun all faded, giving way to an undulating tunnel of pure light around her.

“Over here. Follow me.”

“Ch-Chiho!”

Chiho had touched her from behind, both bags still on her. Beckoning to Rika, she started traveling down the tunnel of light. From Rika’s vantage point, it almost looked like she was flying. She wasn’t moving her arms or legs at all; instead, she simply focused on the direction she needed to go. Realizing she was going farther and farther away, Rika tried her best to catch up—and just thinking of it gave her the sensation that she was going forward herself.

She wondered if it was a dream, if everything she saw here was a figment of her imagination and she’d be back in the Sasazuka she knew, with Emi and Ashiya.

“If anything happens, use this, okay?”

But the feel of the barf bag and bottle of liquid antinausea medication Chiho gave her, as they flew side by side with each other, seemed too real to be a dream. There was certainly nothing dreamy about them anyway.

“Chiho! What—what’s all this...?!”

Rika finally managed to get the question out. Chiho’s reply failed to clear up much of anything.

“We’re inside the Gate. Right now, we’re flying down the path the Gate opened for us.”

“F-flying?!”

“It’s gonna take a little time. I got kind of sick my first time, so let me know if that happens to you.”

“Time? Huh? What was all that just now?! This is a Gate? Like, through space?!”

“It’s a spell that connects between worlds. We just jumped out of Earth, on our way to our destination.”

“Our... Where?!”

“Where do you think?”

Chiho's cheerful smile seemed downright terrifying to Rika right now.

"The world our lovers are on."

Rika woke up to a scent she was familiar with—the smell of tatami mats.

"Huh...? I..."

Slowly, her eyes opened, rewarding her with the sight of a tatami-mat floor.

"...It was a dream?"

It was a pretty crazy one—her and Chiho, flying through space. There was this secret door to another world under the tatami-mat floor of Room 201 at Villa Rosa Sasazuka, and they jumped right through it and outside of Earth.

"Nnnnh... Huh?"

Then Rika noticed the unnatural amount she was sweating. It was really hot inside this room.

"Wait... Did Maou's room have a heater...?"

Her eyes gradually came into focus.

".....?!"

Then she could feel the blood drain from her head. She was right—she *was* on a tatami-mat floor. But this wasn't the one in Room 201.

"Uh... Whaaaaaa?!"

If Rika was familiar with the term *redoubt*, she would have used it here. It was a hard floor she found herself on, one that seemed to go on forever in all directions. Looking up, she found a ceiling that seemed cloaked in darkness. Large pillars, like the trunks of some primeval forest, were lined up in neat rows, and next to her, an altar the size of a small mountain.

It was a vast, unnerving space, one whose stone, or brick, or earthen surfaces seemed to echo Rika's screams forever, and in some areas, it seemed oddly dilapidated. Looking closely at the floor, she could spot holes all over the place, and some of the columns were falling apart. It could only be described as an ancient temple or ruin of some sort, and she had no idea at all why she woke up atop a floor of six tatami mats neatly arranged in the middle of it.

“Huh? Is this...?”

Still recovering from the shock, Rika looked around her surroundings, only to find something else lying on the mats.

“Oh, this is Maou’s...”

It was something she was as familiar with as the mats themselves—a cheap *kotatsu* table that had been used and abused for far too long.

Then, in this space that barely seemed real, someone else’s voice rang out.

“What...? What is this for...?”

“Ah?!”

The room was too large to make it clear where the voice came from. Her head swiveled around again. Then she heard it—a rhythmic thudding, as if a couple of heavy objects were being struck against each other. The sound soon took on a more familiar shape.

“Oh, good, Rika, you’re awake.”

“Emi...?”

It was Emi Yusa, Rika’s best friend. She was dressed in some kind of ethnic clothing unfamiliar to Rika, but her face, her hair, her eyes, and her voice were unmistakable.

“Emi, where are we...?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything!”

“Agh?!”

Without answering the question, Emi hugged Rika, her voice ringing out almost in alarm.

“I was in such a rush, there wasn’t time to talk. I thought about going back to talk things over with you, but then all this stuff piled up over here, so I kept getting delayed... I guess it’s the New Year now, huh? I’m so sorry!”

“Ahh... Yeah, uh, um...”

Rika noticed the smell of Emi’s preferred brand of shampoo on her, along

with other pointless things, as her slow voice plodded along.

“Um, where are we? What are the tatami mats from Maou’s place doing in this weird chamber?”

“...Oh, right. Wow, Rika, you don’t know anything yet!” Emi hurriedly undid herself from their embrace and clapped her hands. “But aren’t you hot? Take off your coat first. It’s winter here, too, but we’re so close to the equator that it’s always pretty warm.”

“Huh? Um, okay.”

Rika followed her instructions. Freeing herself of the cocoon of heat inside the coat made it quickly feel cooler.

“Can you stand up? Oh, put these on. These floors are pretty cold.”

Emi pointed to a pair of what looked like leather slippers next to the mats.

“Um, Emi? I think I jumped in through the floor at Maou’s place.”

“Yeah, Chiho told me. She pretty much forced you along without explaining anything, huh?”

“Uh, yeah. Like, I’m really not dreaming, am I?”

“Who knows? It’s like a dream to me.”

Emi did appear to be in high spirits, grabbing Rika’s hand as they navigated the gigantic space.

“I always wanted to show you my homeland, after all.”

“Your...homeland?”

After a while, they finally reached the edge of the space. There was a window here, looking like it was gouged into the wall, and Rika sleepily surmised that the blue on the other side was the sky.

“Some people might get angry at me for saying it...but I think the view from here is probably the best.”

“Oh...”

Following Emi’s lead, Rika put her hand on the window frame and looked

outside.

“Rika, welcome to Ente Isla, Land of the Holy Cross.”

The window, it turned out, was pretty high up. The perfectly flat blue sky extended all the way to the horizon, the prairie way down below spreading out far and wide into forests, roads, marshes, and lakes as far as the eye could see. A flock of birds of prey flitted across the air, a species like none Rika recognized from Japan.

“...Ah,” she said as she took it all in. It was just so expansive, like nothing she could see from Kobe Port Tower or Kyoto Tower, and she could tell that people were teeming down below. She could see that, and while she wasn’t sure if it was her eyes playing tricks on her from this high up, she felt like she saw some other creatures, things that definitely *seemed* alive but moved and acted like nothing she could even imagine.



“Um.....Emi, what did you just say?”

“Hmm?”

“Where are we again?”

“Ente Isla.”

“Huh?”

“You’re in the main city on Ente Isla’s Central Continent. The ruins of what used to be called Isla Centurum.”

“Huh? Um, huh?”

“Kinda hard to swallow?” Emi asked, curious about Rika’s muted reaction.

Rika nodded deeply, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“Well, wanna go down to the surface? It would take a whole day to walk down there, so apologies in advance, but we’ll take the quick way.”

“Huh? From here? Where to?”

“To the ground level. I bet this’ll feel a lot more real to you once you say hello to everyone down there. Pardon me one sec.”

“Ah... Ah!”

The next moment, Rika was scooped up in Emi’s wispy arms. They both had identical body types, but the sight of Emi picking up a grown woman like she was made of papier-mâché reminded her all over again that this girl wasn’t from Earth at all.

But that wasn’t the problem. The last time Rika found herself carried like this, it led to assorted terrifying events right afterward, didn’t it?

“I won’t drop you, but hang on tight for me, okay?”

“Huh? Wait... Emi?”

“Here we go.”

Rika in her hands, Emi planted a foot on the window frame they looked out from just a moment ago.

“No, wait a.....”

Her voice was lost in the air. She couldn't even scream any longer. Out of nowhere, Rika was flying through a sky she had never seen before.

In front of her wide-open eyes, the ground began to loom closer. But they weren't going fast enough to be in free fall. And when she realized Emi was actually floating down, a lot more slowly than some of the more extreme roller coasters you see in amusement parks, Rika spotted them all—the masses of people on the ground.

“Wha...?”

It was a huge crowd, all dressed in assorted types of clothing and armor. She could spot multiple ethnicities among them. From Rika's perspective, many of them were clearly human. Everyone else, though? Completely different.

“Wha—wha—wha—wha...?”

There were beasts walking on two legs. There were giants literally the size of a house. It wasn't birds flying through the air—it was people shaped like birds. Some of the crowd didn't make it up to the height of a human being's waist. There were walking skeletons, straight from the campfire horror stories of Rika's childhood.

And there, in the middle of this massive throng, was a girl wearing a bandanna and an apron, standing atop a stepladder and using a large mixer to stir the cauldron in front of her. It was Chiho.

“This is Devil's Castle. The *real* one Maou and the other demon officers used to storm Ente Isla.”

“Are you kidding meeeeeeeeeeeeeee?!”

The scream made Emi wince, as much as she seemed to revel in the reaction.

Several of the people (creatures?) in the crowd picked up on Rika's shouting, Chiho among them.

“Ooh! Rika!”

She bounded off the stepladder and ran up to their landing point.

“Wha—wha—whawhawha—!”

“Rika! You’re awake! Listen, I’m really sorry! I forgot to explain to you how to land!”

“Seriously, Chiho...” Emi lectured. “I know you were in a hurry, but try to be more careful from now on, okay? If Bell didn’t happen to be free just then, we would’ve had to delay treatment for a while.”

“All right! I apologize!” Chiho meekly bowed her head.

“Whawhawhawhawha—?”

“Rika? Are you good? Can I put you down now?”

Emi did just that, but it didn’t help Rika recognize the sights and sounds around her any. She only managed two or three steps forward before falling to her knees.

“Rika! Are you okay?!”

“Does it still hurt?!”

“The reality,” she woozily replied.

“Rika?”

“The reality of it hurts. I mean, you told me all about this, but *this* is a whole different thing. Forgive me if it’s kind of freaking me out. Ahh, Ente Isla. This is really it, huh? Ahh...”

Her eyes focused far away.

“Yeah, you sure got me.”

“Lady Rika Suzuki, I understand that you have provided both public and private support to the Hero Emilia during her journey in the alien world of Japan. My name is General Hazel Rumack, leader of the Federated Order of the Five Continents. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“S-sure...”

“I am sure some of our customs might seem strange from your perspective, but a friend to the Hero Emilia is a friend to all Ente Isla. If you lack for anything during your stay here, do not hesitate to bring it up with any of us in the Order.

We will make sure your needs are promptly attended to.”

“S-sure...”

Chiho was followed soon after by another of the Hero Emilia’s friends. Rika was quickly hustled over to a rather ornate tent—that belonging to Hazel Rumack, commander of the human forces in the area. To Rika, however, the sight of this clearly executive-looking woman in impossibly ornate-looking armor bowing her head and speaking fluent, polite Japanese to her as she sat upon a fluffy, expensive-looking chair and served tea in a cup so intricately decorated that Rika was afraid to even touch it was a tad difficult to comprehend.

“Hmph. So it’s you, eh? The friend of Great Demon General Chiho, the ‘McDonald Barista’?”

Only slightly less difficult to grasp was the creature that now entered the tent behind Chiho, looking a bit like a gigantic praying mantis.

“I am Farfarello! General of the Devil King’s Army! And I have come to prepare for the upcoming battle alongside the humans!”

“S-s-sure...”

The demon, whose name would require several repetitions before Rika could get it down, took a glance at Chiho. “Any friend to Her Excellency Chiho is a friend of mine. We demons may not have the consideration for their fellow man the way a human might, but please make yourself at home.”

“Th-thanks...”

She couldn’t help but notice that one swipe of his serrated forearm could probably lop off both her and Rika’s heads, but the demon with the tricky name seemed to be treating Chiho like someone in a higher class than himself.

“Um, Chiho, sorry to bother you...”

“Hmm?”

“Why did he call you a McDonald Barista?”

Chiho glanced at Rika, then Farfarello. “Um, it’s kind of my nickname in the demon realms.”

“Uhh...”

No explanation would do much to quell the maelstrom inside Rika’s mind right now.

“Chiho, did he just call you ‘Her Excellency’? Are you *sure* you’re not secretly a fancy wizard or something?”

Rika, face tensed up, looked at Chiho and Emi.

“I mean, where do I even begin with this?”

She looked around the camp. Even after Farfarello left, countless humans and demons were walking to and fro through it on their business. She brought a hand to her stomach.

“Wait. So that guy with the name that sounds like a fabric softener brand—that’s a demon?”

“Oh, you mean Farlo?”

“I thought it was longer than that?”

“That’s his nickname. Farfarello’s too long, so...”

“You give nicknames to demons. Great. But if he’s a demon, why am I all right?”

As she now realized, she was feeling none of the pain the full brunt of the Great Demon General Alciel had brought upon her. And considering all the demons milling about, there had to be a ton of dark force in the air.

“I guess you could call it a lucky break,” Chiho offered apologetically. “The moment we left the Gate, I forgot to tell you how to land and you kind of hit your head and got knocked out. Suzuno volunteered to treat you, and she cast some holy defense on you so you’d be okay around demonic force to some extent.”

Suzuno was, to say the least, livid at Chiho, but that was another story.

“Like, a barrier or something?”

“No, it’s activated the holy force in your body to resist demonic energy. Ente Isla is full of holy energy, so it’s a lot easier to apply it than in Japan.”

“...Ugh, this is making no sense at all to me. It’s like you’re trying to describe a game to me on a system I don’t even own.”

“Well, regardless, as long as someone as strong as Maou doesn’t go full demon in front of you, you’ll be fine around—”

“Oh! Right! Maou!”

The moment she heard the name, Rika shot to her feet, almost knocking that expensive-looking teacup off the side table. She had to lunge at it to avoid disaster.

“Where’s Maou?! What’s going on?! Tell me what’s going on! None of this is making too much sense yet, but I need to know what’s up! I know we’re on Ente Isla, but why are you acting so naturally around here, Chiho? Tell me! What’s up with all the dudes from that apartment in Sasazuka?”

“Um...”

“Where should we start...?”

“Hey, I heard Rika Suzuki was here?”

Chiho and Emi were just giving each other an awkward glance when a face popped up at the tent entrance—a human-looking man who Rika knew well. It was one of the three demons that once, not too long ago, wrecked Emi’s world.

“Maou...”

“Hey.”

Sadao Maou was dressed in the same jeans and UniClo shirt Rika remembered him in—the kind of thing you’d see on almost any young adult in Japan.

“Oh, uh, happy New Year, Chi.”

“Happy New Year to you, too, Maou. I purchased some of the simmered kelp Ashiya asked for, so I’ll serve it at the next meal, okay?”

“Emi...is this reality?”

It didn’t seem that way to Rika, but the incredibly humdrum conversation Chiho was having with Maou in this fantasy landscape made it all seem like

nothing but a dream.

“It sure is,” her best friend told her with a content smile. “I’m not sure I really believe it, either, but this is exactly the reality I’m looking for.”



“It’s all Emeralda’s fault, y’know, for suggesting that stupid Christmas party in the first place.”

Sadao Maou was seated at the *kotatsu* sitting on top of the tatami-mat floor laid out in the throne room, enjoying the kombu kelp Chiho bought for him. It was a scene straight out of Room 201 in Sasazuka.

“She framed the whole thing as something for Alas Ramus’s sake, and—you know—if that’s how it is, then whether it’s at Emi’s place or not, of course I gotta go.”

The main difference was that this was the real Devil’s Castle—not the postwar-era Villa Rosa Sasazuka but a vast, opulent throne room, the very site of the Devil King and Hero’s ultimate battle.

“But if we all bought our own presents for Alas Ramus, at least one of us was bound to buy the same thing for her. I was super-busy with training, so I woulda had to chisel some time out of my schedule to shop for it, too. That’s why I suggested—hey, I know Alas Ramus is important, but it’s not like we should shower her with gifts from the get-go. Let’s just pare it down to what the girl really wants and pool our money together for it.”

“Yeah. That sounds smart.”

Rika wasn’t sure how Urushihara would find any money to contribute to the cause, but she agreed nonetheless.

“Like, with a present, if the recipient likes it, that’s great, but if she actually uses it, that’s golden. You gotta go with something from the heart—that’s what Ms. Kisaki taught me. But this is all such a new experience for Alas Ramus. If we surprise her with something she doesn’t want, it’d be a buzzkill for both of us. So I asked Emi to try and casually ask her what kinda stuff she’d like. And then...”

Early the next morning, Emi had reported to Room 201, tears in her eyes. An

alarmed Maou had asked her what was up, but she had just gone inside and asked him to summon Chiho and Suzuno at once. It was barely past sunrise, but given the way she was acting, Maou sensed it was wise to follow her instructions. Both of them came to Room 201 without complaint after having the situation explained to them.

The previous night, Emi had fulfilled her promise to Maou and casually asked Alas Ramus whether she had anything she wanted. She was a fan of corn soup, Emi knew, as well as curry. Relax-a-Bear was a big hit with her, as were small animals, and toys, and plushes, and stuff. But Alas Ramus didn't want any of that.

"She said she wanted to see everyone," Emi choked out between the sobs. "I didn't know what she meant at first—the Devil King, or Chiho, or Bell, or whatever...but it wasn't any of them."

Everyone in the room held their breath, struck by an uneasy premonition.

"She wanted to see Malkuth and all her friends. She said she didn't want anything else."

Nobody had any words to comfort her with. Her tears smashed apart any would-be conviction that something from the store would ever please Alas Ramus.

"Devil King, everyone... I was such an idiot. This entire time, that child wanted nothing more than to see Acieth and Erone again. But I turned my eyes away from that. I shut my ears from that. Wasn't that just so stupid?"

She hugged herself as she cowered down to the ground, as if cradling the Alas Ramus inside her.

"I... I was so preoccupied with myself."

A near-infinite amount of time seemed to pass. It was really just half an hour or so, but that was more than enough time to change the minds of everybody inside Room 201.

"Look... Devil King..." Emi wiped the tears and looked up at Maou. "Is it all right if I go?"

“.....!”

Maou gasped. Why was she asking him for permission? Why *him*?

“I don’t care about Ente Isla. No matter what kind of danger its people are facing, it doesn’t matter to me. But this child is the only thing I truly care about from the heart. I can’t abandon her.”

Being a Yesod fragment, or fused with her holy sword, or whatnot didn’t matter.

“This girl is my...”

“Ahhhhhhhh, maaaaan!!”

Maou could no longer allow Emi to go on by herself. There was no way he could have Emi shoulder the punishment for all their crimes. That, at the very least, he could never forgive.

“Ashiya!” he barked, scratching his head.

“Y-yes!”

“Urushihara!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Chi!”

“Yeah...”

“Suzuno!”

“Yes.”

“...Emi?”

“...Devil King.”

Maou lifted Emi’s chin upward, toward him. They looked eye to eye.

“Look, we were *all* stupid pricks looking out for ourselves! That sound about right to you?!”

Nobody in the room tried to deny it.

“So I think I told you about Sephirot and the Sephirah back when Ashiya was

kidnapped. The guy Laila and Gabriel wanted us to defeat is holding Alas Ramus's family hostage. Alas Ramus is beside herself with loneliness because she can't see them. That means there's just one thing for us to do."

After finishing the simmered kale, a bowl of rice, and a cup of instant miso soup, Maou left the empty dishes on the table and put his hands together.

"We need to bring Alas Ramus to them. I dunno if you could call them her friends, or her siblings, or her cousins, or whatever, but some grown-ups out there are treating them like crap, and we gotta whip their asses. I guess if we whip Ignora's ass, too, that'll be doing whatever Laila wants us to do, but I don't really care about that. Nothing in any of this takes higher priority than Alas Ramus."

Rika looked at her rice bowl for a moment, then lightly nodded. Now it all made sense.

"The one statement that turned it all on its head, huh?"

"Hmm?"

"That's how Chiho described it. She said you were all so comfortable with sticking around in Japan, but one word made you all change your minds."

She nodded again as she finished up her midafternoon snack and looked around the throne room she was currently sharing with Maou.

"Pretty funny one-room apartment you got here."

"You like it? This is my Devil's Castle. Not really my original one, but..."

"No? Given how you rebuilt the Shuto Expressway, I figured this would be a piece of cake for you."

Maou shook his head. "I made the outside, but the interior's been part of the demon realms for ages now. It dates from back when the Devil Overlord Satan—the Satanael guy Gabriel was talking about—descended into our realm."

He stacked up the dishes and left the table, heading for the window Rika flew out of not long ago. Rika followed him.

"The guys from heaven were able to set up shop where they are on the moon because they had those mobile colony cities. Did you hear about that?"

“A little, yeah.” Rika nodded as she looked up into the sky out the window. Two moons were floating there in the middle of the afternoon.

“So Ignora and her team used the samples they got from Caiel and Sikeena to craft an immortality formula not long after they left their home planet for good. They gradually used it on themselves, gathering data and searching for a new habitable planet they could call home.”

“Sounds like it could’ve taken forever. I mean, when I first moved to Tokyo, I looked at five apartments in one day, and that was enough to exhaust me.”

“That’s a lot for one day, man. You probably couldn’t even figure out which was better than what by the end of it.”

Rika gave this perfectly normal reaction an eager nod.

“So anyway, those guys all wound up there. They tried to rule over the Sephirot on Ente Isla before it could conjure up a second Caiel and Sikeena for them. Basically, Ignora wanted to create a second paradise for her people, but Satanael was against it. His vision was basically, like, once we find someplace and things calm down, let’s undo the immortality and live in this pure new land as human beings again. But after seeing how foolish humans can be, the Ignora camp wasn’t buying any of it. That Sephirot had only just chosen Ente Isla and taken root in its land; it was trying to guide the people on the planet to their own utopia. But while Satanael and Laila and a few of the angels were against it, Ignora’s camp was in the majority. Can you guess why?”

“...No.”

“Well, they may’ve been immortal, but they still feared for their lives. None of them were willing to take these bodies that never got sick or starved and just toss them away. So Satanael left. He fled with his son Lucifer and the Sephirah Yesod, the core of Ignora’s immortality tech. He wanted to release the people of this new planet from the nightmare of living forever.”

“Yesod... Meaning Alas Ramus and Acieth?”

“Yeah. Caiel and Sikeena formed the base of Ignora’s research, and they were born from the Yesod back on their home planet. It was only natural they’d use the Yesod and Malkuth from *this* planet to continue with their research.”

“This is kind of a lot to wrap my head around. I’m still dealing with the reality of this fantasy world.”

“Yeah, maybe... Let’s go back down for now.”

“Be gentle.”

Rika rode on Maou’s back as he plunged down from that dizzying height once more. All so they could go wash the dishes from their meal. It would have been hilarious if it wasn’t true.

While the Lord of All Demons looked for some water to wash the bowls with, Rika, a bit more clearheaded now, looked around the camp for a bit. It was arranged neatly in rows of tents from the base of Devil’s Castle, overseen by a tandem effort led by General Hazel Rumack and Malebranche leader Farfarello. This was the site where humans battled bitterly against demons just a few years ago, but an alliance had been forged thanks to Ashiya and the Knights of the Great Eight Scarves, which had come under control of the demons once more. The forces were being led by Emeralda, Suzuno, Urushihara and Laila, and even Chiho to some extent.

The goals of this combined force, on the surface at least, were to dismantle Devil’s Castle and withdraw all remaining demons from the area while making it look like they had been wiped out for good. In other words, it was a cleanup effort—they wanted to eliminate all trace of the demon invasion and bring any remaining hostiles back home. Most of the demons here, outside those under Farfarello’s direct command, were forces that had survived life on Ente Isla ever since the first invasion.

This entire operation was treated as top secret. Maou was going around as a human being, not as a Devil King, since having him be “defeated” by the Hero Emilia would help keep confusion to a minimum should word get out about this.

“So Satanael tried to bug out of the colony, but Ignora, and Camael, and the others raked him over the coals for it. In fact, they even condemned it as yet another example of foolish human behavior. That despite their ‘guiding’ an entire planet’s worth of people to do their bidding.”

“And the people on Ente Isla didn’t think anything was weird about it?”

“You kidding me? Ente Isla at the time was still a bunch of prehistoric hunter-gatherers.”

“Oh, right, the people on heaven have these really long lives, don’t they? The whole scale of this is amazing to me.”

“Well, I’m almost done, so make sure you’re taking notes. It’s gonna show up on the test, so...”

As he spoke, Maou was busy washing the dishes, drying them and putting them back in their place.

“The Sephirah are all about selecting human populations that deserve to be saved, but that doesn’t mean all the competing species died out or anything. So Ignora used the guys who *weren’t* picked by the Sephirah and did something terrible with ’em.”

“Something terrible?”

“Yeah. They modified their genes and used ’em as experimental test subjects for the immortality research they conducted after Satanael took the Yesod.”

“Test subjects?!”

“Yeah, well, you can see how that kinda pissed Laila and Satanael off. It pretty much erupted into all-out war, but you know, even the test subjects wanted to keep on living. Maybe Sephirot skipped them, but we’re still talking human beings, y’know? So it’s not like all the modified test subjects just did what Ignora’s team told them to do. Satanael rounded them all up for his side to build his numbers and also so he could give those dudes a little more protection.”

Rika noticed the look of serenity on Maou’s face when he referred to “those dudes”—and that his eyes were focused on the demons, the grotesque monsterlike creatures around them.

“H-hang on, Maou. Are you saying those test subjects, the ones the Sephirah didn’t pick...?”

“With Yesod stolen from them, they needed something else to base their immortality research on. For their DNA sample, they picked Sikeena—in other

words, the Sephirah Malkuth. That's the Sephirah that rules over physical matter, and I guess it paid off, because the test cases received an incomplete form of immortality. They could go without food as long as they wanted, their life spans increased drastically, and their bodies underwent assorted changes. Some of 'em grew horns, some of 'em grew wings, some of 'em got tails...and some of 'em cast off the holy energy in their hearts and replaced it with something else."

He pointed out a group of demons lined up in front of a cauldron full of soup Chiho was watching over.

"So, yeah, we demons used to be human, apparently. Just a different ancestry from the humans dominant on Ente Isla now."

"Wowww," Rika half moaned. It was such an epic origin story, she didn't know how else to react. "So that story..."

"A fair amount of people know it by now. Ashiya and Urushihara, of course. Emi, Chi, Suzuno, Emeraldal, and Albert. Emi's dad, Acieth, and Erone. Amane and my landlord. We had to let the higher-ups in the Federated Order and Emeraldal's Holy Magic Administrative Institute on Saint Aile in on it, too, so they'd volunteer to pitch in. Also, he's not here, but I have a proxy over in the demon realms taking the throne in my place, and I told him, too. And you now, I guess."

"I kinda feel like I'm the one least impacted by it out of all of them."

"What're you talking about? History isn't written by us. It's written by people like you. People observing things one step away from the action."

"I'm honored you put it that way, but I'm just one girl in the middle of these devastating events. I have a feeling anything I could say is gonna be buried."

Rika gave Maou a closer look. This is something she was already well aware of, but the Sadao Maou in front of her wasn't a single iota different from any other human being she knew. She knew he looked like this only after he was drained of all his demonic force, but it made it easier to imagine how, at the core of every demon, there was a human being who provided the root framework.

But this presented another question. A question that made Rika wonder if Maou had ever considered it.

“But you know, why is Sephirot and the Sephirah picking one human species over the other in the first place?”

“Hmm?” Maou murmured, washing additional dishes. Rika, for her part, was already looking at a passing contingent of Eight Great Scarves knights from Efzahan, not thinking too much about what she asked.

“I mean, all the knights here don’t look any different from you or Ashiya right now. The way you just put it, your ancestors were the un-chosen ones, right? So why’s Sephirot being choosy with people on Ente Isla? What are its criteria, and why does it only choose one?”

“Umm...” Maou’s hands stopped. “...Maybe it’s got its own reasons. God only knows, to borrow a phrase.”

“Huh. Well, no matter what you’d say about it, maybe they really are just that much different from you, huh? Like on the DNA level.”

Rika turned toward another group of what were clearly demons. Something about this seemed convincing to her.

“Okay, so if Ignora experimented on these guys, why are they living in the demon realms now? They were kind of like prisoners to her, weren’t they?”

“Eauhhh...”

Maou winced, as if a fish bone was caught in his throat. He quickly recovered, going back to his drying and putting-away duties.

“Well, after Ignora created the sort-of prototypes for the demons, Satanael basically decided she had gone crazy. So he picked up his ball and left. He needed to get a safe distance away from Ignora’s side, since they were more capable of staging a full-on tactical war than his team. He needed to round up the demons, give them protection, and use the few angels who joined his side to train them into a fighting force somewhere far away from Ignora. So Satanael created the demon realms—by which I literally mean that he basically took his part of the colony and the chunk of moon it was on and cut it away. I can’t even imagine what kinda impact that had on the planet, but...ahh, Satanael was a

scientist, so I'm sure he picked the exact right time to do it or whatever. Nowadays, it's a demon-infested wasteland, but at the time, it was kind of like an evacuation vessel, protecting Ente Isla from its invaders... They called it Satan's Ark."

Satan's Ark—the former domain of the Devil Overlord and the subject of myths and legends among all demons, including Maou as he attempted to unite their lands. It was literally a rescue ship, partitioned off by Satanael from his home colony.

"When I first made it to Satan's Ark, there were still records dating from Satanael's last fight with Ignora, not that I understood what they were when I first saw them." Maou paused a minute, basking in nostalgia. "But Satanael was beaten by Ignora. He died in battle. The angels with him scattered all over the place, and the poor, primitive demons with them had to flee as well. I didn't know it, but this Devil's Castle itself was actually carved out from the remains of the Satan's Ark Satanael left behind."

"Huh?!"

"You can use Gate magic to transport a whole bunch of people at once, but there are limits to it, and I wanted to save the demons capable of casting it for the Ente Isla invasion. So we used this instead. Right now, Ashiya and Urushihara are out commanding demons and knights from the Eastern Island to repair the internal workings of Devil's Castle. They're borrowing some help from Emerald's Holy Magic Administrative Institute, too."

"Wait, are you saying this... This whole castle is a spaceship?!"

She had been told that this Devil's Castle appeared out of nowhere in the middle of Isla Centurum, the largest city in the Central Continent, and destroyed the whole place overnight. It literally crushed the city, landing right on top of it—and then Maou and the other demons rebuilt the outside to make it look more like a castle.

"We need something on this scale or else we wouldn't be able to transport all the troops we intended to have. To be honest, though, when Satanael carved out his chunk of the moon, it wasn't exactly a precision job. I kinda regret not using this thing more effectively. Hopefully I can get Devil's Castle back up in

the air. That's gonna be the first step toward figuring out how to get Alas Ramus her present."

"Oh, right, you were here to give Alas Ramus that present, weren't you?"

Maou's story was on such a massive scale, beginning with the origin of his species and everything, that Rika had totally forgotten. This massive battle, involving three worlds and a million different races, had all started simply because a little girl had a present she wanted.

"Yep. So any fight that doesn't directly involve that, I'm not gonna try too hard in. Plus, I got a training shift the day after tomorrow."

"...Sorry, come again?"

And now Maou was shifting the scale so rapidly Rika couldn't keep up.

"Huh? I said, I got my first training shift of the year in two days, so I gotta go back to Sasazuka. With Emi it's more like tomorrow morning, so *she's* gotta get back to Eifukucho tonight. Chiho's going back today—you know, she can't be away from her family *too* much during the holiday."

"Wait, what? I'm sorry, I don't really understand. Chiho! Hey, Chiho!"

"Hiiii! Sorry, can you fill in for me real quick?"

Called by Rika, Chiho enlisted a nearby demon to tend to the cauldron before running up to her. The demon was hideous, easily several times the size of a human being, but he obediently began stirring the pot after the teenage girl asked him nicely. It was comical. Given that demons didn't even need to eat, Rika wondered what this one even thought about its assigned task.

"Chiho?! Didn't you say that Maou and Emi quit their jobs at MgRonald?!"

"Huh?" Chiho's large, round eyes looked up at her. "No, I never said that."

"Sure you did! You said they 'already worked it out' or whatever."

"They did. Yusa and Maou worked out their shift schedule so they never have to be on duty here and at MgRonald at the same time."

".....Oh."

"With the Gate, they can get back to Sasazuka in about forty minutes, so

they're both still working shifts at McGonald, you know? Maybe not quite as many as before, but..."

".....Forty minutes? ...Oh."

Forty minutes could get you from Shinjuku in downtown Tokyo to Hachioji, the final stop on the Keio line, if you boarded the express train. From Rika's home in Takadanobaba, it'd give her enough time to reach Shin-Tokorozawa on the Seibu Shinjuku line or maybe Nishi-Funabashi, the last stop on the Tokyo Metro Tozai Line. For that matter, if they boarded a Tokaido Shinkansen bullet train at Tokyo Station, they could reach Odawara, on the way to the beaches of Atami, in forty minutes. On the Tohoku Shinkansen, they'd just barely make it to Oyama, way over in Tochigi Prefecture.

"Aren't these other worlds supposed to be super far away? I mean, what the hell?!"

Rika grabbed her head and kneeled down on the floor. Looking at her, Chiho whipped out the glowing feather pen used back in Room 201.

"I can use this pen to open a Gate without any holy force. I could get one for you, too, if you like, Rika. I'm sure Laila or Gabriel could make one for you, and Emeraldia could teach you how to use it in about an hour..."

"You make it sound like I'm learning how to ride a scooter! This is crazy! You're treating it like it's nothing! Over in their apartment, you were going on like I was never gonna see Emi and them all again! What the hell happened?!"

"Huh? Was that what it sounded like? I'm sorry. It was so early in the morning, I was kind of tired, and it was, like, super-cold in there. I guess it made me sound a lot blunter than I usually am. I'm sorry... Oh, and can you believe it, Maou? It got down to twenty-eight degrees in Tokyo this morning! I thought I was catching a cold for sure!"

"Wow, twenty-eight? That's pretty cold. Kinda nice how we're near the equator on this planet, huh? Makes it hard to figure out what clothing to bring, but..."

"What is this, a vacation to you?! Gimme my tears back!!"

From an impartial perspective, Rika was making perfect sense. Unfortunately,

common sense was not prevalent among Maou or Chiho right now.

“Oh, hey, if you wanna borrow a scooter, by the way, I could lend you one. This is your first time in Ente Isla! If you wanna go explore the land, we still got those bikes me and Suzuno took here. I mean, we wrecked them, but I heard Albert’s managed to track down all the parts we need, so I could get ‘em repaired for you. It’s the same type I use for MgRonald deliveries, so it’s super-stable. You won’t have any problem keeping it upright at all. You sure don’t need a license here, either, and we got two of ‘em, so maybe I could even have Ashiya show you around. He told me you helped him out a lot with his phone, so—”

“Is this really another world?! What kind of alien world has motor scooters?! What am I even doing here?! And oh, God, keep me way the heck away from Ashiya! I’m already panicking enough as it is!”

“Huh?”

“Oh, um, Maou, Rika and Ashiya kinda have some, uh, things going on right now...”

“They do? Huh. Didn’t know.”

He really didn’t. As with their TV purchase, all he was aware of was that Rika provided Ashiya a crash course in smartphone shopping the other day.

“Boy, she looks really stressed out.”

“Oh, hey, Emi.”

“Yusa!”

Emi popped out from the general’s tent, attracted by the sounds of Rika’s agony.

“How could I *not* be stressed out by all this?!”

“Rii-Sis, what’s wrong?”

And Alas Ramus was in her arms, no less. Rika didn’t know whether to laugh or scream.

“I’m sorry, Alas Ramus! I’m just on the verge of losing my marbles right now!

And seeing you here of all places literally just made me think I should've gotten a gift for you! As if I had the free time for any of that!"

"...Huh?"

"Yeah! Huh is right! Exactly!!"

Emi was starting to feel sorry for Rika. Handing Alas Ramus over to Maou, she gave the raging Rika an embrace from the side.

"Look, think of it this way. Let's say we had to move out to the suburbs due to some family stuff. Just pretend that the train line to our new place is over in Sasazuka. Once the New Year's season is behind us, I'll be back at my place in Eifukucho every night to sleep, and I guess Suzuno can't keep the apartment empty for too long at a time, so she'll be back in Room 202. Besides, when Chiho's over here, somebody needs to take her back home afterward. The demons need to stay here for longer, what with fixing up Devil's Castle and all, so they brought all their stuff over here, but none of our lives are really changing that much. See? Look."

She looked straight up at Devil's Castle.

"Just think of this as a really big one-room apartment, and it starts to seem a little more normal, doesn't it?"

"...You're being ridiculous."

It was a little too much for Emi to ask for. But it still brought the smile back to her face.

"You know I couldn't accept this in a zillion years. You and Maou just have all these zany surprises for me, I hardly even know what to think anymore. What does 'a big one-room apartment' even mean? That's not funny. And this apartment's a spaceship, too? It's so absurd I'm still pretty convinced it's a dream."

"Well," Maou said as he walked up to his castle, "sorry to disappoint you, but it's all real. We're going to use this Devil's Castle to attack heaven. With the Gate closed to there, that's the only way to do it." He placed a hand upon it. "After that... Well, what are we gonna do after that, Emi?"

“I dunno. We can think about it later.”

Right now, Maou and Emi—or Mommy and Daddy—were working together for a common goal. But it was worth remembering that many, if not most, people on Ente Isla had no idea this battle was taking place. The tragedies engineered by Maou and his cohorts, including the destruction of Isla Centurum at the hands of his Devil’s Castle, were just as vivid and true as they always were.

“I’m not a Hero any longer. If any thought passes through my mind during this battle or even after it, it’s probably gonna be about how we’ll spend next Christmas with Alas Ramus.”

“Huh. Guess things’re pretty peaceful with you after all.”

“They sure are,” Chiho said to Rika. “We’ve all worried and fought and exhausted ourselves long enough. Nobody’s going to complain if we start doing a few constructive things for ourselves now.”

“...Well, I’m glad you’re treating it like this casual easy thing, but you do realize what Emi’s starting to sound like, right? Vis-à-vis Maou?”

Rika meant it as a warning to Chiho, in a way. Chiho was ready for it.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m ready. No matter who I’m competing against, I don’t think I could lose to anyone.”

“Well, if you’re okay with that, then fine.” Rika scowled a bit. “Me, though, I dunno...”

“My liege, may I have a word?”

Suddenly, the voice of an invisible Ashiya echoed across the area. Rika reared back, cheeks bright red with shame, as the rest of them tilted their heads slightly skyward.

“What’s up, Ashiya?”

“Well... Hmm? Is someone there besides Emilia and Ms. Sasaki? I sense another human being.”

“Umm, nothing to worry about. What’s going on?”

Chiho was shaking her head and making a giant X with both arms next to Rika. Maou gave her an odd look but got the message anyway.

“Er, yes... Well, I am afraid we have a problem.”

“A problem?”

“Yes. We’ve learned that, as things currently stand, a full repair is no longer possible. Urushihara told me of serious problems with the engine, the transmitters, the fuel system, and almost everything else.”

“We can’t cover for that with magic?”

“We need to fabricate some new parts from scratch to fully fix it. I will have Urushihara discuss it directly with you later, but that is the preliminary report I received.”

“From scratch...? That stuff was made in heaven! What’re we gonna do about that? It’s not like they were kind enough to leave blueprints for us, right? Man, I don’t remember wrecking it that badly.”

“I would describe crash-landing it in the middle of Isla Centurum as ‘wrecking it that badly,’ personally.”

Maou frowned at this evaluation. It made Emi chuckle a little.

“We might be able to bring it into the air, but if we advanced upon heaven with it, we can expect a healthy counterattack. I think we should act to eliminate as many question marks as possible beforehand.”

“Yeah, but how’re we gonna get the parts we need?”

“One of them’s easy enough,” interrupted Urushihara’s voice. *“We can find it in Ente Isla’s Northern Island. The other stuff, I figure we can get in the demon realms.”*

“The Northern Island and the demon realms?”

“Yeah, dude. You should contact Camio and have him organize a search party for what we need. I dunno where exactly we can find ‘em yet, but I know everything we need, at least.”

“For real?”

Something about Urushihara's uncharacteristically serious tone of voice was lighting a fire inside Maou.

"Okay, so what are they?"

"They're called the Noah Gears," Urushihara stoically replied. "The relics of the Devil Overlord."

"The Noah Gears?"

"Yeah. That's what Satan...I mean Satanael called them. It's one of the few things I do remember from back then. He said they're the keys to launching Satan's Ark if they ever return to the moon."

"How do you know that's in the demon world?"

"Because heaven's looking for 'em. I think Ignora knows we need them to revive Satan's Ark. Gabriel even asked me about them once."

"Ohhh? So what are they?"

"The Nothing. The Spear of Adramelechinus. The Sorcery of the False Gold. The Astral Gem. Those four things. Satanael just had to make it a huge pain, huh?"

"Mm? Mmm."

The reasoning behind it was clear enough, however. The Nothing and the spear were mere weapons by themselves. The sorcery was just a chemical formula, the Astral Gem just a big chunk of energy. They were all unusual and wondrous relics, yes, but they were all replaceable. Only when all of them were in the right place did the Devil Overlord's bequest form the gears that drove the ark.

"Ugh... After all this time, fights from even the distant past are still affecting us to this day..."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"No, not pretty much, you. It was your father who did it."

"What do you want from me, man? Like it's my fault my parents screwed up my future so bad. You're a dad now, too, Maou, so try not to be as irresponsible

as those guys, okay? Anyway, that's my report."

The Idea Link faded away, returning silence to the surroundings.

"Um, so the spaceship doesn't work right now?"

"Pretty much. Now we got even more junk to look for. No rest for the wicked, I guess." Maou cracked his neck a couple of times before taking a deep breath, sighing it out, and steeling his resolve. "Emi? Chi?"

"Yeah?"

"Yes!"

"It's not gonna be next Christmas."

He looked straight into the eyes of Alas Ramus in his arms.

"What, Daddy?"

"It's gonna be your birthday."

"Ooh?"

"Alas Ramus, I'm gonna have this all wrapped up by your next birthday."

"Um, and when is that, Maou?"

"When do you think?"

Maou grinned and raised Alas Ramus up toward the sky in his arms.

"Eeeeeee-hee-hee!"

Everyone at Room 201 on that day had been there for the birth of Alas Ramus—that little girl, enjoying the sensation of flight in Maou's hands.

"The time limit's this summer! The next Obon festival this July in Tokyo! And I'm gonna give you the best birthday present you've ever seen, Alas Ramus!"

The bold declaration wafted its way into the air, into the afternoon overseen by the two moons in the sky.



THE AUTHOR, THE AFTERWORD, AND YOU!

There are quite a few occasions in the year when it's considered acceptable to give gifts to one another. After New Year's, there's Valentine's Day in February, followed by White Day in March, where women in Japan give presents in return to the men who gave them Valentine's gifts. In the spring, you have the hat trick of Mother's Day, Children's Day, and Father's Day, along with the *ochugen* summer gift-giving tradition. No time for rest after that, though—Respect for the Aged Day comes in September, and then the year is rounded out with Christmas and the *oseibo* period. (Let's not forget birthdays and anniversaries, either.)

I doubt many people go through the effort of preparing something for every event, every year, but I'm willing to bet that most of us are on either the giving or receiving end for at least half of them. Out of them all, however, it's still Christmas presents that I have the most trouble figuring out.

It's one thing if you're a grown-up shopping for a child. It's just a matter of considering what they'd like and buying it—a book, a toy, some kind of educational thing, or maybe an electronic gadget. But what about all the presents adults buy for each other? I have no idea what the best answer is for something like that. There's no standard go-to, like a carnation for Mother's Day or chocolate for Valentine's Day or some equivalent-value sweets for White Day. For *ochugen* or *oseibo*, the standard is some kind of local produce or something the recipient and their family may find useful. Father's Day is about thanking Dad for his hard work, and Respect for the Aged Day is about hoping your elders stay healthy for years to come; a lot of people receive trips or other presents along those lines.

But what makes for a Christmas present if neither the givers nor the receivers are devout Christians? From what I can tell, in Japan men mostly give jewelry or handbags, while women give men useful business accessories or clothing. Is that sort of thing really well suited for the Christmas season, though? I'm not so

sure of that. People might counter that by saying something with a Christmassy design is best—but of course, that's going to be something wintry, so you can't use it all year, and there'll probably be some other limited-time design the very next year. At the same time, though, nobody's asking you to go into a Christmas date with your lover and bring a tree, or a roast turkey, or some fancy cake as your main present.

Christmas was never originally about celebrating individuals (like with birthdays) or bringing your feelings for other people across (like Valentine's or Mother's Day), but in modern-day Japan, it's now taken on aspects of all those holidays, leading to this crazy sense of expectation among many recipients. Sometimes, I feel like people use Christmas to say something they missed the chance on earlier that year—fathers who were gone for business on Father's Day, lovers who were too busy to celebrate a birthday, relatives you couldn't reach before now. It's your last chance to really celebrate the end of the year without all that other holiday stuff in the background. I imagine most people make up for past omissions earlier than December 25, but if you're wondering what to get someone for Christmas, maybe think about what you couldn't do for that person up to now. The answer could come more quickly than you'd think.

Volume 15 of *The Devil Is a Part-Timer* takes Christmas, which is packed with all those different thoughts and motivations, and stuffs even more complex issues into it.

With any gift, it's what's in the heart that matters first. A gift doesn't have to be a thing or something of financial value. And one thing I especially want to note is, with everyone giving their all during Christmas, I definitely don't want any gift-giving traditions associated with Halloween, which has grown in popularity in Japan lately. We've already got enough on our plates.

With that, I hope to see you all in the next volume!

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