

Fate/Bonds Beyond Humanity

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76- Destruction Vs Immortality: Round Two

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Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome one and all to another fine day in the Youth Devil Tournament! It is I, Naud Gamigin, who calls you today to watch the match between the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess Rias Gremory versus the Sole Daughter of the Phenex, Ravel Phenex!

All around the stadium several screens showed the two competitors' faces in several confrontational stares with lightning between them as the audience filled the place, chatted happily or bought food before the Rating Game began.

There was plenty of cheer and joy being thrown around as some scenes from previous Rating Games were shown and the announcer kept hyping the match up.

Will we see the power of the Red Dragon Emperor again today? Or will the Bomb Queen be his match? Perhaps one of the Phenex's Knights can slay the beast but only if they can pass through Medusa's High Priestess! His face appeared officially and he was sitting at a table with two other men for company. ***We all shall witness all that and more. Helping me today are two very illustrious gentlemen; the Underworld doesn't need an introduction for my first guest as he is one of the greatest competitors in the Rating Game circuit. For now he holds the third overall place but never was shy of striving to go even higher, Bedeze Abaddon!!***

He was of course referring to a blond man with noble bearings which included a sharp face and cheekbones was dressed like he was straight from the fifteenth century with long hair that reached his shoulders and a very pompous tie.

Sitting to the professional announcer's left he had a decent build that showed signs of training if not overly so, basically an indication he practiced one sport or another so long as his position allowed him.

Truly many devils knew him for some on the stands shouted praise to his name and, almost as if he was hearing them despite otherwise being the truth, he gave his fans a handsome smile and a wave before adjusting the mic to speak.

It is my pleasure to be here to see the future of our nobles and their might. Truly a privilege to participate in such an excellent event, Naud. Bedeze spoke with grace as his pale blue eyes stared at the center of the stadium where the crystal ball which was going to show most of the game remained inert. ***I also confess it is a little weird being on this side of the fence, per say. Usually I would be there, testing those girls to see if they are ready to join their peers in our most honored, and recent, traditions that are the Rating Games. Alas, I am too much of a veteran for this tournament.***

Indeed, indeed, indeed. For a man like you who holds several victories in direct Rating Games, it can only be odd to be just 'part of the audience'.**" A lie as they both knew the man watched several matches of the current first place Diehauser Belial and others in order to plan for his matches. But it was all for the sake of the audience as their words waved a tale to catch their interest. **"With that in mind, should we expect a comeback in this year's circuit? The last one you came so close to the first place trophy.

The blond man gave everyone his best smile but the professional announcer could see a vein pulsing on his forehead despite how small it was. ***Oh but I certainly will win this time. Last rankings showed me Lord Belial isn't as invincible as everyone thinks and I came close to usurping him- I mean, his lordship is undoubtedly powerful,*** the man added with fake humility, ***but I am sure if I had just one or two more tournaments I would have overtaken him in the rankings. Unfortunately it isn't by surpassing my rival but because he is growing incredibly busy with his duties as the Lord of Belial. A real shame.***

While Naud didn't believe his fellow devil's words for a second he still had his role to play. ***A real shame indeed. But then, again, there is something said about retiring from the scene as an Invincible Champion. The Emperor hasn't known a single defeat in a Rating Game.*** The other man couldn't help but nod in agreement as it was the complete and absolute truth. Then the announcer added an important observation the noble was forgetting. ***Ah, but let us not forget that you aren't the only contestant to the throne, mister Abaddon.***

Once again the man could only nod respectfully as he couldn't deny that, ***True, once Lord Belial grows too busy with his duties it will be a competition between me and Roygun to see who is truly worthy of being the New Emperor.*** The man spoke without malice even if there was some irritation on his face. It quickly vanished as he spoke from the heart, ***It would be unfair not to consider her since she is ranked second right now. Then again, the reason she is second is because I faced Lord Belial earlier when we participated in the same tournament and she got lucky to only face him closer to the finals.***

Quite, quite. Another lie but Naud's poker face was tens of times better than the other devil. Anyone who watched the Rating Game circuit knew Roygun Belphegor was quite a skilled competitor and powerful devil herself, not someone who needed advantages to reach the top. ***Between the two of you it is hard to say who will be the new Emperor as your powers are comparable to Lady Belphegor.***

True, true. But she is too whimsical and lacks the grit to reach the throne reserved for the strongest. Was the Abaddon devil's honest opinion.

One not shared by the professional announcer and he was quick to change the subject by drawing attention to the third male in their box. ***Forgive us for not remembering you until now. It is rather rude since you are a guest.***

The black haired man who wore a dark suit with a red tie who did his best to look professional just let out a sigh before doing what he always did when stuck in a problematic situation pretty much outside of his control; focus on the job and avoid getting burned.

Since he never commented on an event like a Rating Game before, the man could only hope his skills in observation compensated for any outrageous mistake. ***It isn't a problem since you two are the veterans here. I am glad to sit back and learn to make sure I won't make a fool of myself.***

Ho ho, such a trustful man the Sitri Clan sent to us today. By his tone of voice and smile everyone could tell that Bedeze was pleased with the answer. ***From what I heard you are a magician but also a teacher, right? Going so far that you taught the Heiresses of Sitri, Agares and Gremory a thing or two.***

You give me too much credit, lord Abaddon. Such prodigious devils like themselves had little to learn from me. Although I did my best to show them the sort of magic they could face on Earth, both the human kind and other esoteric branches.

The more savvy watchers of the interaction could tell that the long black haired man had pegged Bedeze as someone overly proud who valued position more than most even in the Underworld's society so he used the exact right lines to put himself in a position of deference while also implying devils were the superior magic users.

His deductions were proven correct when the pureblood devil laughed freely. ***Truly you are a man of great means and intelligence... I duly apologize but I didn't catch your name just yet...*** Being called a lord despite not being one also helped his mood in spades, exactly as calculated.

Naud presented his best shocked expression for the audience. ***How could I forget to introduce him? Is he someone unremarkable? No, it was my failure for everyone who is anyone in the magician community knows his name. The Clocktower, considered the most popular center of learning for any magic, approved of his work.*** The devil noticed the man was doing his best to not wince. It helped the man remember that his guest wasn't a noble and considered a smaller player in a big game so he streamlined the introduction. ***An educator first and foremost, his work expanded the possibilities to many younger magicians to improve their magic.*** Even if the reactions were minor the devil was centuries old and a consummate professional who caught the smallest changes like the relaxation of the man's temples. ***Let us all give the warmest of welcomes to this gentleman, Waver Velvet.***

Relieved that the devil hadn't gone too far with his introduction, the long haired man nodded with a pleasant smile. ***It is an honor to be here and an even greater honor to be the first magician invited to comment in a Rating Game.*** He said, acknowledging that his position was one of privilege. However he also knew the reason why he was given that chance in the place of several nobles. ***I can only hope to help all the audience understand some of my students' moves, even if their magic had already surpassed mine by much.***

Expected since humans still have much to learn about magic. Commented Naud as

gently as he could. ***But that is what your project is about, correct? Striving to join the young generation of many species in a common setting to not only teach each other their own magic but also to help them to acclimate with the more... mundane society, is what you call it?***

Really? I wasn't aware of the details... Bedeze rubbed his chin in thought. ***A good opportunity for everyone to learn from each other while studying in a human city. Not that I would, the Underworld is still the best world.***

Recognizing patriotism for what it was, Waver nodded before pointing out, ***But just seeing the same sights may get stale after a while. What my project proposes is an expansion of horizons, not just magic.*** He paused for a second before adding. ***And I must thank the Clans Sitri and Gremory for their continued support for the project. I couldn't be more grateful.***

While gratitude is great many can agree it is thanks to your vision and efforts it got so far, mister Velvet. Naud praised freely but saw the man was barely moved by it as the magician only nodded.

I would gladly speak more about the initiative, our plans for the future and the advantages of pursuing an education both mundane and spectacular with similar peers but unfortunately I was called here to comment on a Rating Game even if I feel very ill prepared to do so.

Hoh~ It sounds like someone roped you into it. The Abaddon devil noticed before the professional commentator did. ***Someone from Gremory?***

That time Waver couldn't help but wince even as he coughed quickly to cover it for the camera he knew was still on them. ***While yes, it was a noble, it wasn't a devil who roped me into it, as you said, lord Abaddon.***

Not a devil but by your tone I can tell it is someone extremely obnoxious to you. Bedeze pointed out and it took a world of effort for Waver to not react. Then the devil snapped his fingers and asked, ***It is a woman, isn't it?***

Nor Gremory or Sitri. Was all the teacher had to say on the matter before turning to the most experienced commentator, who was watching the interaction with amusement, to ask, ***Shouldn't the game already be starting?***

No, no, no, mister Velvet. We still have a few minutes. The pre-show and byplay are also important and an art of the Rating Games. Naud informed the magician who couldn't help but sigh which made the devil chuckle. Meanwhile politics and bets were happening at that very moment it was their job to amuse the audience. ***See that? We are going to get a few dancers from both Clans to make a presentation. Then the Rating Game will begin properly with all in the audience sitting and ready.***

Besides, it isn't time yet. Bedeze revealed while using magic to see the time. ***All devils value deals and an itinerary is a deal between the audience and the entertainers. So**

all Rating Games start at the exact right time... At least the arena and combatants are revealed at the right time. It is fair to argue that the fight had already started.*

... True enough.**" Acknowledged Kuoh's teacher. **"Plans are probably already drawn.

Speaking of which, any idea of what your students have in mind for this particular game?

No idea. The Gremory group in particular has always been good at improvising and impressing. Commented the black haired man. ***All that I can tell for sure is that, whatever they have in mind for us today, was carefully thought out. If there is one thing I always admired about the Gremory group was their harmony.***

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"You stubborn mule!"

"You are the one with horseshit!"

"Because I am right?"

"What was that you said again? 'Just because you are correct doesn't mean you are right?'"

"Don't sass me woman! This and that are different things!"

"Yeah, because I am right!"

The whole ORC watched the back and forth between the redheads with either amusement or dread as that was the first time several of them saw the two fight over anything. Sure they had their arguments before getting together as a couple but once they did most of those discussions were behind closed doors or completely vanished.

It helped because both Shirou and Rias believed in good communication in a relationship and when things got too hot it usually led to some passionate moments between the two before the discussion resumed with calmer heads the next day.

Suffice to say that didn't happen over the last few days and with the Rating Game about to start the redheads began to disagree with Rias' plans for Ravel. Half an hour later and the insults began to fly as even if they loved each other patience had its limits. Since both saw themselves in the 'right' for that particular conundrum neither was willing to back down.

"Should we do something?" Ise managed to ask as he and Asia watched the proceedings with great concern as Rias began to shout words usually not reserved for polite company. "Buchou 's getting really mad."

Akeno nodded slowly but showed no haste as she and Medusa fixed her priestess outfit. "The swear words are new but the fight itself isn't."

“It isn’t?” Irina asked in horror as her and Xenovia, both dressed casually with the latter wearing a cream colored top with jeans while the former had a green t-shirt, looked ready to jump in to separate the redheads.

“Relax, both of you. They will never come to blows.” Rin pointed out as she helped with Akeno’s hair.

The Tohsaka’s Family head wore a long sleeved shirt similar to her favorite sweater but more generous to her figure combined with a short black skirt and long stockings that ended a few inches short of the skirt, showing a little of her tights.

Her father had insisted that she used something formal to watch her first Rating Game but since everyone was dressed casually Rin decided to do the same. There was also an extra act of rebellion there but those clothes were also practical as they had hidden pockets to hide several jewels.

While the twin tailed magus finished fixing Akeno’s hair, the Queen happily pointed out, “Unless Rias is into spanking~” referring to the former previous statement.

“Pervert.” Koneko couldn’t help but say and Ise felt a tingle of happiness to know he wasn’t her target for a change.

Kiba chuckled as Shirou shouted back after Rias finished her rant, starting one of his own. “They are right. Before they started a relationship this was usual every time they disagreed with something. Just shows how strongly they feel about the situation.”

Shaking her head, Setsuna pointed out, “You all remember the Rating Game starts in less than twenty minutes, right?”

Nodding her head, Medusa decided to take control of the situation and clapped her hands loudly, reminding the redheads they weren’t alone in the room. “Since this whole fight will be null and void if a solution isn’t found before the Rating Game, either you two settle everything now or this will be a metaphorical stone in your relationship for the rest of your lives.” Rias winced as Shirou looked to the side with shame. “That said, fifteen minutes. Whatever you are going to decide, if one is right or not, you two have fifteen minutes to decide something.”

Such was the word of a goddess and everyone knew she was right. The subject of discussion was both the Rating Game and what was to happen after it, making all discussion before it began poignant. But irrelevant if a conclusion wasn’t reached before the match began as the redheads wouldn’t be able to communicate or coordinate.

Coordination at least was key for the Mage of Sword’s idea and so he was the one who needed to get things going. “Look, I understand you are angry at Ravel-”

“Positively furious and ready to kill her if I can get away with it.” The Heiress of Gremory acknowledged without a hint of shame or remorse as she fixed the tie of her school uniform. It wasn’t necessary nor was really bullet proof like the rest of the ensemble, but she liked it.

“But I probably can’t so-”

“So you are going to escalate in the worst way outside of murder? How is that going to solve the problem without having the rest of the Phenex swearing vengeance?”

“Because I will pin them down and make sure they don’t have the chance.” The Crimson Haired Ruin Princess was there. Shirou could see in the woman he loved a warlady ready to take her pound of flesh. “I will crush them under my heel and grind them to dust until they and everybody know that I am not to be messed with!”

“Do you have any idea how many enemies you are going to make in a night if you go that route? I get you thinking every single Elder Devil is against you because of your stance on several things but you are not stupid enough to not realize that isn’t the truth.” The magus tried to remain calm, to regain his control but he needed his lover to see the storm she was brewing. “Listen to yourself, you are talking about ruining lives.”

It was the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess to pause and take a breath. “I tried your path, we tried mercy. They spit it off, kicked it down the road and threw blood in it.”

“One person, Rias! Just one!”

“And she is the one who will pay the most!”

“Want to antagonize-”

Medusa interrupted them again. “Alright! This isn’t working!” The goddess declared firmly and the two redheads took steps back from each other. Shirou messed with his hair while trying to think of other arguments while Rias leaned on a wall staring at her lover with a conflicted but strong expression. “Mayhaps, my Champion, you should give up this fight.” Everyone saw Shirou flinch at the purple haired girl’s declaration but she moved on. “The situation is delicate and politics aren’t my specialty but letting the matters go without any form of punishment will only make matters worse.”

“Thank you.” Rias nodded to Medusa, much calm even if her expression remained hard.

Irina nervously raised her hand. “But just punishment won’t solve the problem. It’ll create resentment.” The Church’s representative almost fell when all eyes shifted to her and it was easy to see most of the room was on Rias’ side. She gulped but soldered on seeing that Asia was on her side, nodding in agreement. “The Bible... I mean...”

“No quotes, please.” Begged and warned Luvia who took a jewel from her dress’ sleeves, ready to make a barrier against sound just in case.

“Right, huh... what I am trying to say is...”

“What Irina is trying to say,” Kiba decided to speak as he understood the situation more than most, “is that just retribution is not as satisfying nor as effective as everyone thinks.” Nobody challenged the Knight on that and Shirou nodded in gratitude. “See, I know that Ravel hurt

Agares-sama and you want to make her pay but that won't bring Agares-sama's eye back."

"So we should just let her go?" Challenged the King, looking both at her lover and her Knight. "Should we just forgive and forget? No, no. I refuse that. Even if I can't take an eye, I will take something."

A sigh escaped Shirou's lips as he understood what his lover needed but also what could be lost because of it. "Revenge is never good, Rias. You know there are plenty of stories that-

"The Count of Monte Cristo would disagree with that." She pointed out before he could even finish his statement.

"One out of a hundred doesn't mean you are part of the one." Rebutted the taller redhead with a worried expression. "Besides you forget that, because of the accusations he suffered and the vengeance he enacted, Edmond Dante was a changed man. It wasn't just for his actions either since he suffered and struggled to make sure his revenge would only hit those he deemed guilty." Shirou pointed out calmly. "'Wait and hope'. Those words can be both about salvation and revenge." Then he shrugged. "Also, his tale was about definitive guilty men."

Rias almost gasped in disbelief. "Are you insinuating Ravel didn't take Seekvaira's eye?"

"She did but her plan involved inflicting pain and the eye... it may have been an accident." Better arguments could be offered but he was with devils so he needed to try and think like one. It was a reach but also an attempt of giving the girl the benefit of the doubt. "Either way if her case is also about revenge then it is also a sample how it backfires."

"That doesn't excuse her." Rin pointed out unhelpfully.

"But it gives her the benefit of the doubt right?" Asia asked carefully and Shirou was glad her thoughts mirrored his own. "If it was an accident."

"Accident or not, my friend lost an eye." Rias reminded everyone the reason for her fury, happy that Ise, Koneko and Liz were nodding in agreement with her rage. "She did that to get to me and if we don't retaliate properly, this sort of situation will keep happening. People we care about will be in danger."

Moving closer to Kiba, Shirou patted him on the back. "Do you remember what happened to this guy when he was obsessed with revenge?"

"I was a real mess, wasn't I?" The blond Knight asked playfully. His eyes held much sympathy for his King as he stated. "Buchou, if you want blood, we can give it to you but I get what Shirou wants to say; he doesn't want revenge to consume you."

"I don't want it to turn you into a monster I know you aren't." Rias took a step back as if slapped and that was a chink in her armor Shirou didn't miss. "Sure, I agree that Ravel needs to be punished for her actions. What she did is out of the line. But disproportionate punishment will only make us more enemies. What then? Do we kill everyone? And the

people who come to avenge those? Do we kill them too?" He asked loudly as Kiba, Akeno, Medusa and Irina nodded in agreement. "When will it stop?"

"But it needs to start and can stop if we do this right." The Crimson Haired Ruin Princess pointed out, confident her simple argument would settle the matter.

Only that she slipped as that had been her argument from the beginning and Shirou was far more stubborn. "I agree. But what you are doing isn't right- Let me finish." He raised a hand, stopping his lover in her tracks before holding her arm and interlocking their fingers. "There is a real distinction between revenge and justice. What we need is justice."

"Justice that no one will question and justice that will give the Phenex a chance to stop." Medusa observed in blatant support for her Champion as she stepped to his side. "Which is what he was suggesting with his plan."

"An stupid plan, mind you." Rin pointed out and several people agreed with her.

Only that they knew it was the best they had to stop a war between the Gremory and Phenex Clan. "Anyone else have a better idea?" Ise asked while scratching his cheek. "I got nothing from what you guys are talking about politics and whatever but I got that Buchou wants to make sure the other guys can't hurt us anymore while Shirou wants to make sure nobody is going to hurt us because we are hurting the Fried Chicken's family, right?"

"Pretty much, I suppose." Luvia replied, impressed that the Pawn managed to simplify everything and ask an actual good question.

"So... better ideas? Anyone?" At getting no response the Red Dragon Emperor raised his arm covered gauntlet. "Ddraig?"

[Don't ask me. I am in favor of the Heiress' idea.] Announced the dragon and while a strong endorsement it came with a huge caveat. [But you guys aren't strong enough to crush everyone in your way and you want to be part of the Underworld's society so... I would go with the Mage's.]

"Well, it says a lot when a dragon is voting in favor of peace." Setsuna pointed out and nobody could really disagree.

"To be fair, my method is hardly peaceful." Shirou reminded everyone and no one could disagree with that either. "You guys still have to beat Ravel up."

"After convincing her to sign a Geas we will have to write in... Ten minutes." Rias reminded her lover with a shrug only to see him smiling. "Oh don't tell me..."

"Akeno helped me with the Geas."

"Sorry, Buchou~" The Queen pretty much purred as she summoned a magic circle and pulled out a parchment with a long contract written on it. "But let's face it, you always give Shirou-kun what he wants."

“With reason...” Rias let out a sigh and grabbed the Geas. Her eyes grew wide and she glared at her lover. “Those conditions only solve the problem with her and the Phenex Clan will still be pissed.”

“Let me take care of that part.” Shirou asked with confidence, one that earned him a skeptical look. “Trust me, I have a plan... the semblance of a plan... that involves me going inside Phenex Territory.”

“Are you insane?!”

“I take anything good I said about him back.”

[Kid got guts.]

“Alright, alright!” Raising his arms the Mage of Swords glared at everyone. “Settle down everyone. It isn’t like I am going there alone and I am planning to ask for help.”

“From who?” His first lover asked carefully.

“The Ultimate Maid.” Shirou replied with a smirk and almost every doubt evaporated. “We need to leave Medusa with Sirzechs anyway so I am going to ask her a favor... or two.”

“Why are you dropping me with them?” Demanded to know the goddess who was glaring at the male redhead.

He easily reminded her that, “You are a VIP here and I have no doubt that plenty of nobles and ambassadors want to speak with you.”

“And who will be protecting me since you are going to be on a mission and my priestess will be on the match?”

“Setsuna will be there but even if she doesn’t count you will have Xenovia, Liz and Rin.”

“No.”

“Now, hold on, Master-”

“If everything goes right, Grayfia will be watching my back, the Strongest Queen and Lucifer’s wife. More firepower and political capital than I know what to do with it.” Shirou was going to use it all in a meeting. “Zeoticus will also be there so you all just enjoy the game while I drag the Phenex Clan kicking and screaming to the meeting table if necessary. Or the only one who can help us mend that fence... All things considered...”

Everyone could see that the Mage of Swords doubted his own plan but looked willing and ready to go through it if just for the slight chance of settling things in a remotely peaceful manner.

Letting out another sigh after finishing examining the Geas, Rias glared at her lover. "I still prefer my method. Ruthless, simple, less risky... for us."

"In the short term." Shirou observed with a small smile. "But you have to agree that in the long run, talking is better than fighting."

"If Ravel hadn't really intended to cripple Seek-chan I may be willing to give her a chance." The Crimson Haired Ruin Princess raised the argument coldly. "Because if she did, the kid's gloves are off."

Knowing that condition was non-negotiable, the Mage of Swords nodded. "Anyway it will be good to have the Phenex recognize that it was an isolated incident with just one of their members, right?" A fact necessary for further negotiations in either case. Still Shirou saw Rias still was unhappy with the outcome. "I know you don't like this but I prefer you unhappy for not getting revenge than letting it distort you."

"... Tsk, Shiro, I know you are looking out for me but she still hurt my friend. An eye, Shiro, an eye." Rias shook her head before resting it on his shoulder. "I want her to pay."

"And she will, you will make sure of that." The Geas would ensure it, so long they win the Rating Game. Pulling her chin up, Shirou added with a smile. "Hey, honor and justice are the privileges of the strong and you are going to use both. By the end of the day everyone in the Underworld will know what I know; that Rias Gremory is a badass who won't learn any harm to her friends to go unanswered."

Everyone was treated with the sight of Rias blushing madly before digging her face on Shirou's chest. "Ugh, you know just what to say to make me melt." Taking a deep breath, still on his chest, she took a step forward. "Fine! Let's go guys, we are crushing Ravel and make sure she learns her lesson, one way or another!"

"This is going to be fun." Akeno announced happily as their peerage began to march.

Luvia approached her Queen with a pensive look and asked, "What exactly is on that Geas?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise."

Once the devils had left Rin turned to ask Shirou, "What is on that Geas?"

"The means to contain Ravel Phenex so long she accepts them. And it will involve a fight because the two want it. There is no way Ravel is just going to quit after coming this far... And Rias won't admit it but she wants to vent some anger." When they were working on it Akeno had pointed out tying it to the fight was the only way such a contract would be accepted. Knowing his lover's pride and acknowledging the courage the Sole Daughter of Phenex had to start her scheme he had no choice but to agree. "There are plenty of incentives for her to sign the Geas and no drawbacks..."

"So long she doesn't lose the Rating Game?" The twin tailed magus asked and he nodded.

“But why would Ravel-san sign any Geas like that?” Irina's doubt was more than sensible in her opinion.

Except she didn't play around with contracts and deals much, especially in the Underworld. “Because we will be dangling a bait she won't be able to resist. If anything, just to get Rias on the negotiation table, she only needs to sign it.” Shirou revealed. “Winning or losing, Ravel is going to get what she wants so long her desires are for the Phenex... And if she wants to humiliate Rias, winning the game and revealing the Geas is a nice way to get that too.”

“A necessary risk...” Setsuna observed as she understood that was the best way to cease hostilities even if the loser would look bad. Considering the sort of tournament they were in and their Clans' relationships they would look bad regardless.

However it was Medusa who reminded them all that, “So long as the disfigurement of Seekvaira Agares has been an accident.” The girls could see Shirou wince. “No matter how much you hope for the best, it is completely out of your hands now. Rias and Ravel will fight with the result ending their conflict or starting a greater one depending on the younger's response.”

Because they all knew Rias wanted to kill the blonde pureblood, the redhead didn't even bother to deny that. As much as Shirou spoke of her kindness he could equally speak of her fury. And her bloodlust when those she considered precious were harmed, something both to be admired and feared.

The only reason the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess wasn't taking immediate action and even entertaining her lover was because of how much she loved him and was willing to listen to reason thanks to her love.

For his part the male redhead feared a restart of the Underworld Civil War and everything that could entail. He heard from Rias how Seekvaira was baited by the prospect of influence which meant the Phenex Clan still had friends in high places. Friends that could react badly if things escalated any further.

Perhaps that new civil war wouldn't be on the scale of the previous one but with how much influence both the Gremory and the Phenex had in the Underworld it was a given that a lot of the other Clans could get involved. It would be the duty of the Four Maous to stop things from getting that far but Sirzechs Lucifer being a former Gremory may put him in a precarious position.

No, the best way to stop hostilities was then and there with a Rating Game by shackling Ravel with all the responsibility. By making her an example and the target of the worst punishment, so long that one wasn't too harsh, the Gremory Clan has a chance to normalize its relationship with the Phenex.

That much, at the very least, was a fact Akeno confirmed to the Mage with an impish smile.

“So long Buchou doesn’t go too overboard I think things can end up nicely but are you sure you want that outcome?” Rin asked carefully as they moved towards the Gremory’s box. Fortunately the hallway was empty so Shirou had no trouble to stop, looking at her with confusion which his fellow magus found disappointing. “They tried to kill you, remember? The whole Rutal affair? Several assassins?”

“Rin is right...” Setsuna was the first to agree but Liz wasn’t that far behind with a nod.

“The Phenex is still dangerous.”

A growl escaped Xenovia’s throat before she asked, “Weren’t the assassins and that Rutal guy dealt with?”

Shirou nodded. “It is the whole reason why the Phenex is pretty much under Rias’ thumb. Either way, I am turning the other cheek. I have been trying to turn the other cheek this whole time.” Hardly his fault that the Phenex Clan and Ravel didn’t get the message. “In any case Rutal was punished, we killed the assassins,” technically he killed no one on that occasion but wouldn’t hesitate to take responsibility for Liz, “and Rias threw so many sanctions on their heads that most countries would be crippled by half of those.”

“Yet it wasn’t enough.” Rin pointed out and while the redhead grunted he also kept walking.

“That is why we are trying a... new approach.”

It was Medusa who then pointed out, “Just because a child who doesn’t know best keeps picking a fight doesn’t mean you should kill them.” The goddess observed, equaling Ravel’s actions to a kid’s tantrum. “You punish them just the right way so they learn that fighting without reason is wrong and the adults can do much, much worse.”

“That wasn’t the idea but the sentiment is there.” The Mage of Swords just wanted to get all that matter over once and for all. Then they arrived at the entrance of the Gremory’s VIP box and commented, “Now if you excuse me I am going to try and convince Lucifer, Grayfia and Zeoticus that this is the best way to settle everything before Rias and Ravel start a war.”

“Master, you live to make things harder on yourself.”

“Understatement of the year, Xenovia.”

“And you are going straight for the lion’s mouth as well.”

“I know that very well, Rin. But thanks for the concern.”

Medusa remarked, “At least he is going with reinforcements from the get go.” Her Champion gave her his best ‘stinky eye’ but the goddess just giggled. “Don’t look at me like that. We all were thinking about it.”

The fact none of the other girls disagreed or raised on his defense was all proof Shirou needed she was right.

...

Inside the announcer's box the environment was comfortable and amicable as the three men waited for the main event to begin. Waver at least found the conversation pleasant enough to calm his nerves as he still felt out of place as a commentator. Yet his mind was working as it always would and the teacher made several observations about the two individuals with him.

First impressions aside, the deductive mind of Waver Velvet couldn't help but scrutinize both men with him in a methodical fashion. It wasn't like he was trying to do it but that was a skill he developed out of necessity and avoiding trusting the wrong person saved him several times in the past.

Especially in the nest of vipers that was the Clocktower where several of the Lords could be the worst people on the planet. Which made it easy for Waver to see that Bedeze Abaddon wasn't far from many of them. Sure the devil acted with charm and care but away from the cameras his interactions with the teacher were close to nil.

Despite not being a noble, and his family not belonging to one of the Pillars as the Abaddon were Extra Devils, the third best ranked Rating Gamer attitude certainly matched any aristocrat or over confident noble thought in History.

'In reality he isn't interested in anything I could say beyond my expertise. He doesn't care about me as a person at all.' The black haired man observed as the two devils talked about one thing or another. 'It isn't even a matter of professionalism since nobody can hear us for the moment.'

Contrasting the athlete, Naud was far more lax and open to any sort of conversation but too eager to please if the professor could name a definitive flaw. Always polite, it was hard for the man to show any displeasure about whatever topics of conversation either of the other two brought up.

Wasn't only curiosity either and that was where Waver labeled him as a 'people's pleaser' as the shorter haired devil did his best to pay attention to both his temporary co-workers and barely noticed when Bedeze took over the conversations completely.

'Not that I wanted to keep talking. Neither of them engage in any of my hobbies or care about my brand of magecraft.' No fault of their own as he literally lived in another world all together. 'Either way this was an educative endeavor but I hope Reines never drags me to anything else like this again. Damn that Archisorte... and Kayneth too for settling me with her!'

Remaining calm, Kuoh's magecraft teacher focused on present company just to distract himself but with how Bedeze kept dominating the conversation and giving no one else a chance to talk he barely got anything new to observe.

Sure learning about a person through his observations gave him a biased view but Waver retained the impression the Rating Gamer was too arrogant and self important while the professional commentator just wanted to please everyone and not make enemies.

'God, I would kill for a cigarette.' Waver's bored mind couldn't help but think before something flickered in his vision.

While the magus didn't know what it was, the devil sitting between him and Bedeze easily turned to press a button. "Everyone ready to rumble?!!!" It impressed Waver that Naud could go from calm to excited in a drop of a dime. And Velvet could tell, by the other man's face, he was really looking forward to the Rating Game. "Feast your eyes on all our screens, ladies and gentlemen, for the match is about to begin. Ravel Phenex versus Rias Gremory!!!"

The excitement in his voice really couldn't be missed, neither how the box shook as his words were amplified outside and the people cheered. As the man said, all the screens and the crystal ball in the center came to life and began to show both peerages appearing in teleporting circles.

Before long the two sides exploded with movement, several of them started to lay traps or investigate the area. 'Where is Himejima-kun going?' Waver asked himself after seeing the Queen say something to Rias and then fly around the fortress.

And it was a fortress, the building they were in couldn't be called otherwise. Perhaps castle if one was trying to be semantic but while the building wasn't necessarily ugly its huge walls and structure indicated a fortress. Four towers, each in a cardinal direction, made of black stone with walls taller than most houses would be ideal for archers or useful for any last stand for example.

A mighty structure indeed, the sort of place that even a modern army would have to bring out the big guns just to breach the thick walls with the length of a train cart. That wasn't even counting whatever magic devils could use to make the place stronger nor the lava moat around the buildings.

For yes, as Naud controlled everyone's vision he zoomed out of the fortresses to show the battlefield and the first thing which caught the three commentators attention was the small lake of lava surrounding the identical buildings on both sides of the battlefield.

Bedeze whistled in appreciation before saying, "Now that is an arena! I was getting bored of forests and cities." He offered a glance to Waver for the first time in a while. "Does that match your descriptions of Hell, professor?"

"Quite. It is certainly a place many artists could see receiving the damned and the corrupt." Between fire, brimstone and lava there was a vale with several sharp rock formations. Walking around was a peril, falling anywhere meant certain death. "While both fortresses are a mirror of each other I can see several different paths, all perilous, connecting the competitors' bases. Regardless, the distance between them is considerable." Frankly the

man judged the fortresses to be in two different cities if there were lines on a map. "Flying is probably the best means for the two sides to meet one another but certainly that would impose its own risks, most due to enemy action."

"I agree, professor Velvet." Naud affirmed with a cheerful smile that only the two other men could see. He really loved his job. "Even considering the arena has several spots with volcanic activity," and the man made the crystal ball show a 'real' volcano, as real as it could be inside an artificial dimension, "obviously both Kings, already proven tacticians, will make sure they have anti-air measures."

"Fliers will take the most risk but also carry the most reward even below the skies." Bedeze added with a fanged grin. "So long they can stay above the lava, that is. I think there is just one person who could take a bath in there and walk away; the Red Dragon Emperor. If he is fully realized." His tone was dismissive as he believed such a thing was far from the truth. "Either case, those with the Fire Element will have a definitive advantage in that battlefield. In fact I know several spots in the Underworld with environments similar to that one."

For a second Naud made a frown of displeasure while Waver only let out a silent sigh as both sides understood what the man wasn't saying; the Phenex Clan was known for their Fire and everyone knew their Territory was mostly a desert of fire and lava.

Field advantage didn't completely nullify the dangers of the area but the Ravel Peerage would know how to navigate around the worst of it while having other benefits which would make all of them bigger threats.

"Fire users will find their spells much easier to use..." Waver said after a pause. "With high temperatures, the dry air and so much of their Element around them, a skilled user won't even need to use their reserves to the most basic attacks." It was his attempt of not calling 'foul' over how much the battlefield should be benefiting a Phenex. The man knew he shouldn't, messing with nobility was folly. "I know no one from Rias Peerage who uses water but even if they did the opposite effect would be true."

Naud, to not allow politics to get in the way or the public to catch on, spoke after a pensive hum. "Not that such spells could do much in a field of lava. Not unless they could use the power of the Original Leviathan, Sea Serpent of the End!" He exclaimed with excitement. "Iiiiihhh, if our forefathers could see what we accomplished with Rating Games! Just the idea of one of the Maous competing is-

"Someone is on the move." Waver didn't want to say anything but he felt it needed to be said when he saw a dot leave one of the fortresses at incredible speed.

The two devils focused on it, the professional announcer focusing the crystal ball on the individual while the athlete commented, "Attacking so soon? Well, it is a way to avoid traps while scouting but it is too early. I mean, without a doubt everyone will see it coming. I know I would..." Said Bedeze while trying to hide his surprise.

A few seconds later they got a clear image of the individual that grew visible to everyone and those rooting for Rias grew wide at seeing the purple dressed priestess. "Akeno Himejima,

the Priestess of Medusa herself, is flying straight towards the enemy!” Naud’s lungs almost exploded from excitement as Waver covered his ears. “The Queen of Gremory had an impressive showing against her fellow Queen and several Pieces of Sona Sitri in her last match! Is she planning to challenge all Phenex Peerage on her own- Wait, what is she doing?”

For a moment all grew mute as the raven haired beauty stopped her flying path. “She is landing...” Waver pointed out the obvious. “Why though?”

“Perhaps some sort of plan...” Bedeze could see the reason to it but also added, “In an open map like that dominating the center is rather pointless since there isn’t any defensive structure.”

“Once again then I ask, ‘whydunit?’” Kuoh’s teacher asked with an intense gaze. “We already know that Akeno is out there, alone and exposed. We know how she got there almost immediately in a planned maneuver that must have had prior deliberation. We need to know the exact right reason.” And Waver tried to figure it out even if he knew the answer would be delivered in a few minutes at most. “Why move to the exact center of the arena,” he pointed out the detail both men overlooked, “where she is open for attacks. I refuse to believe there isn’t-” He was interrupted when the Queen of Gremory summoned something from a magic circle. “Well now... I didn’t see that coming.”

“Isn’t that a... sign of surrender on Earth?” Naud couldn’t help but ask and his doubt was legitimate. It wasn’t every day someone waved a white flag with a huge smile on their face like Akeno was doing.

“If Rias Gremory wanted to surrender she would either retire all her Pieces or just retire herself.” Bedeze pointed out while leaning forward.

Waver nodded in agreement. “Indeed. A white flag means more than just surrender. Depending on the region or the army using it, that flag can mean various things like truce or parlay.”

Zooming out once again, everyone in the stadium was greeted by the sign of the Queen and the Rooks of Phenex flying in Akeno’s direction. Truly she had been seen but looked all too pleased by it as the screens on the stadium that focused on her face showed. She even waved at her adversaries and it wasn’t long for Yubelluna to approach.

What is the meaning of this? Everyone heard the purple haired Queen’s voice, the stadium growing quiet as they waited for an explanation.

Akeno offered her fellow Queen an honest smile that just put the older woman on guard. ***In the name of Rias Gremory, and with all the proper considerations given to me as her Queen, a temporary truce is being called. My King wishes to negotiate with your King about the outcome of certain relevant events pertinent with the match.*** The shock could be felt by all the announcers and a pin dropping could crack the silence if it happened. ***With that in mind I would like to request for us to meet in your fortress or have this conversation here if you have the means of communication or the ability to raise a**

privacy boundary field around us. In either case, Ravel Phenex will like to hear what we have to offer.*

Offer about what? Are you trying to buy your victory? Yubelluna asked with obvious mocking.

The raven haired beauty shook her head, smile still in place as she supported her flag on her shoulder. ***Not at all. We just desire for the winner to have a greater trophy than just victory. Perhaps even the freedom of some obligations?*** That got the three members of the Phenex's attention. ***Would you like to hear us out?***

"Can they do that?" Bedeze Abaddon didn't even bother to hide his confusion; he had no idea of what was going on. "Interrupt a Rating Game to negotiate a prize or... bet something? Can they do that?"

"It isn't entirely unheard off..." Naud pondered. "But usually not in a full blow Rating Game like such nor so... daring, I would say. They remember we are watching, right?"

"That is in their favor... Gremory's I mean." Waver commented. "Can the Phenex just reject such an offer, whatever they want, and not lose face?"

The question was answered swiftly as after communicating with Ravel for a few seconds, Yubelluna turned to Akeno and nodded, ready to guide her to their fortress. All four began to fly in that direction, much to the shock or amusement of everyone watching.

"Are we sure that isn't against the rules? To interrupt a Rating Game to negotiate a contract of some kind?" Waver asked, curiosity and excitement dancing in his eyes. 'This is rather fun.'

It was Naud's turn to touch his ear as someone informed him that, "Ladies and gentlemen, I received confirmation that what they are doing is valid. Unfortunately that includes the privacy barriers that will disrupt our sound while they negotiate... whatever the Gremory wants to negotiate." He grinned with a question on his lips. "Is this a maneuver from the whole Clan or just Rias Gremory making some sort of play. I know I would give an arm and a leg to be a fly when that meeting starts."

And since his voice was transmitted throughout the whole stadium it was safe to say the audience shared the sentiment.

...

Ravel expected many things when her Rating Game against Rias began; a struggle of epic proportions, unusual strategies, perhaps even the redhead sacrificing her own base again, a repeat of their first Rating Game.

Either way the Sole Daughter of Phenex went to the match prepared for the fight of her life, several strategies and equipment that should equalize the battlefield. She didn't expect

Akeno to suddenly wave a flag of surrender or parlay nor that Rias wanted to talk to her before the match properly began.

'What are they planning?' Ravel asked herself while sitting in the throne room of her fortress while sending her Knights and Pawns as far away as she could. 'If this is an attempt of espionage I will give the minimum amount of information. Rather this may be a distraction so leaving my Pieces to work during the meeting is the right move... Yet it is Rias' Queen who is coming here...'

That alone threw her head for a loop as if she didn't care about her image that was more than an ideal set up to retire the Queen and deprive Rias from one of her strongest Pieces.

Except there were hundreds of reasons for Ravel to not go for that option, to accept the parlay and prepare to meet with Akeno to talk or negotiate whatever her King wanted to propose.

After setting up the spells so the thousands in the audience couldn't hear the conversation the blonde sat down to wait. Through the communication spell in her ear she heard Yubelluna confirm they had returned to the fortress. If there was a trap or some sort of trick the Phenex woman believed it would be triggered at that moment.

Instead nothing happened other than two Queens arriving in the throne room escorted by Isabela and Xuelan, her Rooks. Those girls were chosen deliberately as while all grew stronger thanks to further training neither had any new piece of equipment. All they had were the skills already present in the previous Rating Game against the Gremory but refined.

So there was zero chance of Akeno gaining any new information with those three or Ravel herself yet the raven haired priestess' pleased smile told the world she got exactly what she wanted.

Which only made Ravel uncomfortable, especially when those violet eyes studied her form in a more attentive way. In that moment the noble realized that she made a mistake in thinking she was hiding information as her own clothes were far from the dress she used in their first game.

Instead of something suited for balls or fun like her usual dresses, Ravel was using a special pink letter coat and white riding pants. She also wore boots which made her look less like a noble and more like a warrior ready for the front lines. Only a ribbon, also pink, above her growing bosom showed her preferred noble inclinations.

Just a change of style was enough to say she was now a proper combatant and the Queen of Gremory noticed everything, at least Ravel's eyes told her as much as the High Priestess studied her like an adversary, no matter how pleasant her smile was on the surface.

It was a dangerous beauty and the pureblood devil needed to remind herself that the ravenhead was possibly the most dangerous member of Rias Peerage short of Rias herself.

Still her course was set and Ravel soldiered on. "Welcome to my peerage's base, Akeno-san." Greeted the blonde King with politeness. Her eyes landed on the jewel in the older woman's throat as the priestess bowed in respect and that sounded alarms on her head that the Phenex child didn't know she had. "What can I do for the Gremory Clan today? Hope you didn't come here demanding a surrender."

Ignoring the snide remark, Akeno retained her smile as she casted a magic circle. Immediately Ravel's Pieces raised their guard but the blonde herself remained stoic. Her doubt that Rias would use underhanded methods was paid off when something dropped in the priestess hand.

"A crystal ball?" Ravel half asked half mused. "So out of fashion these days."

"Well, my King judged that this conversation should be done in person but circumstances obviously are on the way."

Considering they were in the middle of a Rating Game the pureblood devil could only nod. "Indeed, if she wanted to talk with me, she should have done so before the match."

"It is a... recent development." Akeno smiled with good humor, a joke only she knew about. "Either way, shall I make the call?" After a nod of agreement and the other devils stepping back, Medusa's High Priestess rested a finger on the crystal ball. "Tururururu. Tururururu." She almost burst out laughing at the other women's reaction at her unusual call but managed to control herself when Rias' image showed up. "Ravel is in on the line and ready to talk, Buchou~"

Thank you, Akeno. Nobody moved but Rias' image turned around to regard her fellow King with a cold and calculating look. *Before we begin I have an important question to ask and your answer will determine how we will proceed. Did you maimed Seekvaira Agares on purpose?*

"Maimed'? I think you will have to be-"

Did you destroy her eye on purpose? The question shocked the blonde.

"What? Her eye? She lost-" Quickly Ravel recovered her composure and tried to go on the offensive. "I don't know what sort of game you are-"

Only to be cut off again. *No games, no bullshit, no politics. This is a simple question.* Rias wasn't on the call, the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess was. *Did you destroy Seekvaira's left eye on purpose? Yes or no.*

After a pause to focus, the Phenex woman asked, "Did she really lose an eye?" Inside a Rating Game, without means to contact the outside there was no way of knowing if Rias was telling the truth. Yet upon seeing those blue eyes locked on her with an intensity heavier than mountains, Ravel believed her words. "... I will admit that I fought to harm Seekvaira Agares but my intent wasn't to permanently scar her." Losing an eye was worse than any scar and the growing intensity of the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess's eyes said as much. "What I

sought was to incapacitate her long enough to take her place in this competition.”

Her voice didn't break but there was an honest tone of regret that everyone could hear but Akeno could tell it was legitimate because of the other devils' faces; Yubelluna had a pensive expression, Xuelan's stance grew rigid and Isabela gritted her teeth while avoiding meeting anyone's eyes.

Those were faces of people who clearly saw that their plan went on disarray or left victims in their wake. One way or another they were responsible for the damage on Seekvaira's face and the loss of her eye. Usually such a thing would have consequences and if not for them taking the Agares Heiress place in the Youth Devil Gathering the Clan may have already acted.

Didn't change the fact all four women present expressed signs of guilt that Akeno could identify and judge better than her King. “So, can I take over, Buchou? Or do you want to say something else?”

Because the redhead in the crystal ball saw Ravel's expression she could only click her teeth in exasperation. *I am neither lying nor bluffing. You truly did destroy Seekvaira's eye.* At the blonde's look of defiance, she added, *Damn it, Ravel, why do all this? Is this some attempt at revenge?*

“It is teaching you a lesson!” The Sole Daughter of Phenex rebutted with obstination. “Do you think your actions didn't have consequences?!”

Snorting, Rias shot back, *Do you think your actions don't have consequences now?*

Shaking her head, the redhead then said, *You took my friend's eye, Ravel Phenex! An eye!*

“Rias, it was an accident.” The Phenex Peerage found themselves surprised it was Akeno defending them. “Just a girl who didn't know any better and wasn't careful with the power she has.”

“While I will admit I made a mistake, I won't let you treat me like a child, Himejima Akeno!” Ravel shouted with fury, standing from her throne and glaring at the younger woman. “If this is all you two wanted, leave so we can start this Rating Game so I can crush you!”

We are far from done. Rias informed firmly. *You hurt Seekvaira, took her place and her eye-*

“And I will apologize for the last one but not for the rest. She made her bed and now she is laying on it.” Ravel threw her arm with fury as flames bursted from her shoulders. “But that won't change what needs to happen; Rias Gremory, it is time for our rematch!”

For a few seconds there was silence and then the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess spoke. *Funny you speak about how Seekvaira made her own 'bed' without looking at your own situation.* Her tone was threatening, her eyes devoid of emotion. *After all, it isn't like I have the livelihood of the Phenex Clan in the palm of my hand. Wait, I do.*

“My Clan has nothing to do with this.” Ravel said quickly. “These are my actions alone-”

One could argue you used your Clan’s influence-

“I am ready to depart from the Phenex Clan forever.” Her claim was enough that Rias fell silent as it caught her completely by surprise. Not only them but nobody knew about it as no member of the Phenex Clan managed to hide their surprise. “Every action I did was my own and I won’t hesitate to cut ties with my Clan to prove it. I take sole responsibility for Heiress Agares’ downfall and her wound... if the latter is real, that is.”

Another few seconds went by without anyone saying a peep until Rias scoffed. *You don’t understand those words.* At seeing confusion on her adversary’s face her derision grew as she declared. *And with them you also exposed your weakness. Akeno, make sure she signs the contract.* Clearly the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess was done with the whole conversation and before turning off the call she focused on the younger pureblood with dispassionate eyes. Eyes that froze Ravel in place with discomfort. *Tch*.

“Well~ Buchou was a little upset at the end~” Akeno sang melodically as the other women in the area studied her. With a flick of her wrist the crystal ball vanished in the sleeves of her haori before she pulled out a huge piece of parchment. “But I hope that doesn’t get in the way of our contract~”

“Speak like I am already set on signing it.” Ravel observed while sitting back on her throne, making the Queen giggle. “What is so funny?”

“That you think you have a choice~” Xuelan and Isabela’s fists were covered with Fire as Yubelluna’s staff came closer to Akeno’s face. The ravenhead looked at them with amusement before offering the parchment to her fellow Queen. “Would you like to present that to your King?”

“Careful with your words, Akeno.” The older Queen started with a frown as her staff pulsed with energy. “It doesn’t matter how strong you think you are, you are in our territory. First sign of trouble and all of us will fall on you like bees from a hive.”

“Ooh~ Scary, scary, I am so scared, fufufu.” She shouldn’t be antagonizing them, Akeno knew it. Yet the Hybrid was confident in a couple of factors. “Ahem. But unless I throw the first punch I doubt you girls are going to attack me, right? After all, the goal of this game is the humiliation of Rias Gremory?” Focusing on Ravel and seeing no reaction besides a twitch from her brows, Akeno was confident in that fact. “Am I wrong?”

Xuelan lost her patience. “It is more than that-”

“Then I suggest your King read the Geas.” Akeno interrupted gently while touching the Rook’s nose with her indicator faster than the martial artist could react. The qipao dressed woman almost hit her hand in retaliation but Isabela held her back. “Attacking during a parlay is bad form and you girls look way too ready for a fight.” Those words made the three women take a step back while glaring at the Queen of Gremory with hate. “Looks like I was right, you want to damage Rias’ reputation, probably to help your Clan, right?” Both Rooks

frowned while Yubelluna remained stoic. Same as Ravel when the Hybrid looked back at her. "Which means no cheating like attacking someone during parlay. The public certainly won't like that, especially when they can't hear a word right now."

Letting a sigh escape, Ravel raised a hand. "Yubelluna, the contract." As commanded the Queen approached, walking backwards to never take her eyes off Akeno who smiled contently.

"Don't take too long~" The ravenhead sang as the blonde grabbed the contract. "The sooner you sign, the sooner we start the Rating Game."

"What makes you think I am going to sign this?" With a snap of her fingers Ravel was holding a flame just beneath the enchanted paper. "I could just turn this to ash, send you away and start the game without this circus."

Yet if Akeno was worried about the contract's destruction she didn't show it. If anything she looked even more amused. "I would be very upset if you did that. Took me almost the whole night to get it done. Ah~ but I spent hours with Shirou-kun because of it so that was totally worth it." She said with a small blush that infuriated Ravel and upon seeing the pureblood devil's rage the ravenhead controlled herself to add. "Also that Geas is the best chance the Phenex Clan has from escaping from Rias' thumb."

"What?" Such a declaration had the noble opening the parchment with fervor, making Akeno's smile grow bigger. "This is..." Hesitation filled body as she read the contract twice more.

"The best deal you are going to get." Akeno finally decided to say even as the women of Phenex glared at her hatefully. That just made her spine tingle. "In summary; you win the Rating Game all the obligations of the Phenex Clan to my King become null and she swears to maintain EM away from the markets for the next one hundred years when the subject shall be revisited with your Clan's impute." She shrugged her shoulders elegantly, smiling as cheerful as ever. "Even if EM enters the mainstream after the period expires, that will give your Clan more than enough time to expand, put their affairs in order... basically anything that will soften the blow of the Phoenix Tears becoming obsolete."

"Is this some sort of a joke?!" Yubelluna asked, believing it all sounded too good to be true. Without hesitation she approached her temporary King and began to read the contract over her shoulder, the first several lines dictating the terms Akeno had summarized even with far more legal jargons and complicated words. "This is real... This is actually real... All we need is to win this Rating Game-"

"And Rias won't mess with your Clan for one hundred years so long you also don't mess with us. Just a self defense clause, you know how things are." The Queen of Gremory reiterated as the two Rooks around her looked at each other with wonder and disbelief. "Our Clans would enter into a policy of 'you don't mess with me and I won't mess with you' kind of deal."

Essentially it was everything the Phenex Clan could have wanted considering the most recent state of affairs. It would also free them from the enormous tax and tributes they had to

pay the Gremory Clan because of previous actions. If anything the benefits were overly generous but that was the point.

Akeno was the one who wrote that contract and she lived with devils long enough to not only to know how to make those air tight but extremely desirable. Except there was always the fine print and the one for that magic contract in particular was the fact Ravel Peerage needed to win their Rating Game.

The consequences of defeat were also present and by the look in Ravel's face she just finished reading the whole thing. "Is this a joke?"

"Only if you find it funny." The younger Queen replied after noticing her older counterpart also read the last few lines. "If you lose-"

"Doesn't matter, we won't lose." Ravel declared firmly while standing up, looking every inch like the noble she was.

Yet that didn't impress Akeno who just asked "So you are going to sign it?", a smile still in place.

The outcome was obvious even as doing otherwise would be the same as declaring that her peerage couldn't beat Rias' and if that was the case then all Ravel's plans would be dead in the water.

"This is the fastest solution for all your troubles." Akeno continued to accelerate the inevitable even as Yubelluna's glare grew even more intense. "If your plan is to block Rias, my King, at every corner to help your Clan-"

"My plan is to drag her down, to show everyone that Rias Gremory isn't that great. To nip her support in the bud." Ravel confessed her scheme just as the ravenhead planned.

"For the sake of your Clan?" At not getting an answer Akeno grew more amused. "Then don't sign it. The contract benefits the Phenex more than it benefits you." The Priestess pointed out freely. "Or you sign it and prove Rias right." All members of Phenex present gave the Gremory Queen a confused look. "That you really don't understand what it means to cut ties with your Clan. But hey, it is your choice, them or you."

Pausing for a moment, Ravel scoffed before making two magic circles, one to support the parchment and another to summon a feather and some ink. "I am Ravel Phenex."

"Which is why you don't understand the words." The blonde paused and looked at the violet eyes judging her gently. Almost pitifully. "That is your freedom you are playing with."

"We won't lose." Yubelluna slammed her staff on the floor and a blast of fire covered her as the temperature in the area rose. "So the young lady- my King, won't need to worry about the clause of defeat. We will crush you, Rias Gremory and everyone else who dared to challenge us."

Ravel looked at her Queen before nodding and signing the contract. "Make no mistake, Akeno-san. This contract isn't my prison but my Clan's freedom." With another snap of her fingers a magic circle appeared besides her name. "All your King gave me were the tools to speed that up and stop me from exerting more political pressure on her."

The parchment glowed with orange and dark red before splitting in two copies, one resting on Ravel's hands while the other flew to Akeno. "If you say so." If the younger woman wanted to take the risk, it wasn't the ravenhead's problem. "Fufufu, just so you remember, you are betting your freedom."

"No, I already won and my Clan is free." Ravel declared with conviction, certain of victory. "All we need for that is to make it official by crushing your peerage. Yubelluna, escort her away from our territory, just to make sure there won't be any sort of sabotage."

"By your leave, lady Ravel." The purple haired Queen stepped forward and Akeno offered a bow before following her out of the room. "You are a real devil." She said the second they were in the hallway. "Trapping my mistress in a deal like that-

"Oh, flattery will get you everywhere~" The ravenhead sang proudly. "But I didn't trap her in anything, she signed it of her own free will." They were outside and both opened their wings to fly over the wall. 'Hmm, are they hiding from me or aren't planning to strengthen the walls?'

Yubelluna scoffed before saying, "Stop lying. By the way Rias Gremory talked it was obvious you were ready to trap lady Ravel with some sort of blackmail."

"The possibility of unleashing the EM on the market the second the Rating Game ended was raised, yes." Akeno affirmed the older Queen's suspicions as they quickly crossed the fire field. "But if she was ready to leave her Clan then she shouldn't have cared. This is more about them than it is about her. A pity, really. Lukewarm determination like that won't take her far."

Glaring at her future adversary and someone she considered a rival, the older Queen said, "You don't know what my mistress is ready to sacrifice, what she already sacrificed."

With her usual smile, Medusa's priestess replied, "And I don't care. The goal of the contract is not dealing with the Phenex Clan but with her." Then her smile grew more savage as her eyes failed to hide her fighting spirit. "Unlike everyone else from your Clan, Ravel is still ready to fight and if someone doesn't hold her back people will get hurt in the crossfire."

Both understood the implications and considering that sort of path already made a victim it was truly for the best if the matter was settled with that Rating Game. At least where Ravel was concerned.

Both clauses of victory and defeat from the magic contract predicated that much.

The older Queen glared at her younger counterpart once again before looking forward. "You must be truly certain of your victory to make a Geas like that."

"Oh that is a given. Also needed something Ravel couldn't resist... unless she was really ready to cut ties with her Clan." Akeno said only half as a joke. "You all should be thankful because if it was up to Rias there would be no stopping until Ravel was dead."

In a flash the older Queen's staff was on the ravenhead's face, ready to blast it off. "I noticed you were being too impertinent back then. Treating my King with disrespect."

Delicately Akeno pushed the staff away from her face but Yubelluna fought her off making the weapon shake. "But she isn't your King, is she? Not really." While the older woman frowned she wouldn't lie about her true loyalties. "By the way, that is a nice shade of hair you have. Would you like to meet my goddess? She would love to meet you."

Such boldness only made Yubelluna mad so she turned ahead and accelerated until arrived exactly at the center of the battlefield. By that point the Queen of Phenex was calmer, if a little angry still.

"The truce will hold for a few more minutes." The older woman told the younger and herself. "After it, I will look for you on the battlefield." It was a challenge.

One Akeno took with gusto. "Why leave things to chance?" The priestess pointed towards the tallest mountain in the pocket dimension which was several kilometers in height bigger than Everest. "Want to meet there, let's say, in half an hour?" Violet eyes met purple, one amused, the other angry. "That will give us enough time to help everyone get set and then we can duke it out."

The giggle Akeno presented to Yubelluna actually made the older Queen pause to study her Gremory counterpart more closely. Powerwise the taller woman knew the ravenhead had grown but the personality was different as well. Less shy, more challenging and outgoing.

'Bold' was the word she would settle down after thinking for a moment. "You think I will risk my peerage's victory just to... 'duke out' with you?"

Baraqiel's daughter blinked in surprise before giving the woman a determined look. "Aren't you upset with how things ended last time?"

"You mean a kid blowing herself up in my face? Sure I."

"So why don't we finish that fight? The right way this time." Akeno approached Yubelluna's face with an eager expression. "Come on, don't tell me you don't want to have a real winner. I can see in your face." Sparks began to crack on her hand as she raised it and while the older Queen's grip grew tighter around her staff the woman's face remained calm. She knew the truce wouldn't be broken, no matter how 'hungry' the ravenhead looked. "No more sudden departures. Let's finish that fight once for all to see who is the better woman."

It was so tempting Yubelluna felt like the beautiful ravenhead was inviting her to bed. “Truly you are a devil.” She said while her power began to fluctuate in a dark purple aura.

“Fufufufu. I guarantee you are more of a devil than I am.” Akeno’s power did the same and sparks flew as the two were eager to start fighting. “If you need an excuse for you King, think about it like... taking both Queens off the board. Or does she think anyone else besides you can take me?” Challenging the purple head was the right call as the priestess could see how eager she was to resume their fight. “Come on now, you really don’t want to leave that on just a draw.”

“I wouldn’t call a draw when a little girl throws herself at me to take us both out.” The taller devil said proudly. “More of a cheap trick or low blow.” Yet, for all her provocation, the Bomb Queen saw no reaction from Akeno other than the desire to fight once again. ‘Funny enough, I feel no bloodlust even if she is eager for a rematch.’ Finally Yubelluna declared, “I will meet you there when it is time.”

Sure there were some strategies Ravel wouldn’t be able to use but the Bomb Queen was confident the blonde would see the value of neutralizing the opposition’s Queen. Backing her argument would be another one; Yubelluna honestly believed she could defeat Akeno in the rematch.

And after watching the ravenhead struggle during the match against Sona Peerage that belief turned into certainty that she was eager to prove it.

Trepidation almost consumed Yubelluna when Akeno replied with a happy, “Then I will be waiting.” Just as she was about to leave. Looking back at the younger Queen the bad feeling grew. “Can’t wait for our date~”

With that the High Priestess of Medusa took flight towards her base, leaving the Bomb Queen to wrestle against feelings of uncertainty. She watched her rival arrive at the Gremory’s fortress faster than anticipated which made those feelings solidify in her chest.

Prudence demanded her to forget about the challenge but pride would have her take it regardless of what bad feelings she had. ‘I need to speak with the young miss.’

She would do well with some assurances of victory and only Ravel could give her a few, as long as she was willing to trade Queens.

And if she wasn’t, the mountain was tall enough Akeno would see explosions around the battlefield anyway so they would fight.

It was only a matter of where.

...

Took less than a minute after Ravel signed the contract for Shirou to get what he wanted as a curious Sirzechs asked one last time what exactly his plan was. The Mage confessed something to the Maou that made the man cry from laughing so much.

“Plan is to stop Rias from starting a war. Besides that, just stopping her from doing something cruel.”

Father and son shared a laugh at the declaration as they could absolutely see the Gremory entering in conflict with the Phenex because of Ravel’s actions against the Agares since their Heiresses were friends.

“It won’t be a war, it will be a slaughter.” Sirzechs had informed his fellow redhead. *“But I understand what you are doing and will gladly offer my support.”*

And the man spoke for him and his wife as Grayfia was there listening the whole time and didn’t hesitate to step forward to open a magic circle, offering him to step through it. Teleportation was always odd to Shirou as it wasn’t a matter of speed as much as the bending of space in a way that made him dizzy.

Yet the Ultimate Maid’s Power and skill made the process seamlessly easy to the point that three magic circles later the Mage of Swords felt nothing but wonder as they landed on Phenex Territory.

‘Well, someone is cheating...’ Shirou couldn’t help but think as he looked around the area and saw how similar the battlefield was to the one from the Rating Game.

“No, it is not a coincidence and nobody is cheating.” Grayfia informed him easily, not bothered by the heat or the exertion that was teleporting them across continents worth of distance in a single minute. “Rules were imposed on the tournament to benefit the less experienced King and so...”

Scratching his head the redhead asked his escort and guide. “Did I speak out loud?”

“No, your face showed too much concern.” How she looked at him with her eyes closed the redhead had no idea.

Still he noticed something from her words. “Sure this isn’t cheating but the judges are giving Ravel an unfair advantage.”

The Strongest Queen opened her eyes and asked bluntly, “Do you believe it will make a difference?” She didn’t even need to wait for the answer; his denial was obvious as well. “You already know Rias-ojousama is disliked by the nobility, they will favor any opposition against her... So long as they can get away with it.” Grayfia began to walk ahead towards a castle surrounded by flames. “Now we must be off. The barriers around the area already warned them of our arrival and if we take too long we will seem suspicious.”

“Can I ask something before we go in?” The Mage of Swords studied their surroundings to make sure they weren’t being watched but trusted his intuition which told him they weren’t. He couldn’t trust his nose, the place smelled worse than his forge with smoke and sulfur everywhere. “Why aren’t Sirzechs and Zeoticus more worried about a war with the Phenex?”

“Because they wouldn’t start one, not for Ravel. Better yet, they can’t.” Grayfia didn’t stop walking but slowed down her pace which the magus mirrored. “Their fortune isn’t exactly squandered but it wouldn’t be enough to gather allies and political capital can’t help in a doomed conflict.”

Shirou got the picture quickly. “So there won’t be a war... because everyone knows they are going to lose?”

The silver haired woman nodded in affirmation. “The law is on Rias-ojousama’s side and that means my King can interfere.” She offered him a rare smile. “And with him there is us, his peerage, and the other Maous. The Phenex Clan can act covertly,” they arrived at the door and she concluded with, “but Rias-ojousama can get away with killing a spare or two without trouble. So long, that is, she doesn’t turn into a tyrant. Which is what you are trying to avoid.”

It was a statement Shirou couldn’t disagree with as he would prefer to not see a bloodbath or witnessing Rias starting one. There was no reason to go that far as Ravel admitted the incident with Seekvaira was an accident, Akeno wouldn’t have offered the contract otherwise.

So, the best case scenario when it was all over, was a more peaceful relationship with the Phenex Clan and their daughter still having work to do for her part; her family as a whole needed to cooperate as well.

At least some of them, which included Rias’ ex-groom, to make sure there were no more loose ends. “This is going to suck, isn’t it?” As the one who was there to confront said groom, Shirou wasn’t looking forward to it for several reasons.

“We can still go back and try to work with the rest of the Phenex Clan. Riser-sama is just a third son and so has little influence, so letting him go would be no loss.” Grayfia informed him. “But his peerage is involved and they may have ideas of their own, ideas that can influence the rest of the Clan.” Was a reminder of why he volunteered for that in the first place; to wipe the slate clean, in a sense. “Revolutions start from the ground up with stubbornness and grit. Also, Ravel-sama may have told them her plans.”

Geas or not, Ravel or not, others could start something if they had a good enough blueprint and at that point maybe it would be Shirou asking for their heads if those hypothetical enemies went too far.

Before he could say anything, and no prompt on their part, the door of Phenex Castle opened to reveal a scantily dressed maid. At least when compared to Grayfia who wore a french style as the woman before them had almost a mockery of the Queen’s clothes. No sleeves at all, extremely short skirt and the top only covered the essentials.

Despite dressing like that and the colder air coming from the castle, at least compared to the outside that was hotter than an industrial oven, the brunette maid was still sweating. Yet it was easy to see her movements were practiced and the heat wasn’t really bothering her, perhaps it would be possible to say she was sweating cold if the temperature of the area wasn’t higher than the Sahara’s.

Just how she was looking at Grayfia was enough to understand why she was nervous. "Welcome to Phenex Castle, lady Lucifuge. What can the illustrious Clan Phenex do for Maou Lucifer?"

Taking a moment to let the woman finish her introduction and waiting for something else, the Strongest Queen started her reply with, "Greetings, Marion of the Phenex. It is far from my place to tell how another maid should do her work," it took a lot of effort for Shirou to not snort, "but you forgot something important; to welcome the illustrious gentleman with me." Upon seeing the panicked face on the younger woman, the silver haired devil continued. "This is Lord Shirou Emiya, Magician of Gremory and the reason for this visit."

Once more the Ultimate Maid fell silent and the magus was about to offer some greetings of his own to help calm down the younger maid when Grayfia's red eyes stopped him in place. There was a proper decorum to be followed and even if he didn't care, she did and so they would wait for her fellow maid to react.

Which she eventually did as the panic disappeared behind professionalism, her waist bending into a deep bow. "My apologies, Lord Emiya. I didn't recognize your lordship, please, forgive my rudeness and lack of manners."

At that point the redhead was growing embarrassed and concerned. "It is all right." He turned towards Grayfia to both see if he made any mistake but the woman neither looked at him nor gave indication she was going to say anything else. Then he remembered that coming to Phenex Castle was his idea. "We came here- I mean, I came here to talk with Riser Phenex, if he is available."

Marion rose from her bow and studied the man responsible for many of the Phenex's woes before turning to Grayfia. "He means the younger." The Ultimate Maid informed helpfully before looking at Shirou. "The Honorable Elder from the Phenex Clan also is called Riser and both of them haven't gone to watch lady Ravel's game." The brunette visibly winced. "You are here for her King, Lord Emiya."

"Her King"? Ah, now I remember." The Mage couldn't help but snap his fingers. "You are one of Riser's Pawns, the younger, I mean."

"Yes, my King is present at the moment but he is indisposed." Marion wanted to go back inside the castle and get as far away as she could from Grayfia. "If that is everything I fear you came here for nothing, Lord Emiya."

Once again Grayfia took over the conversation. "Then it should be the master of the house or your lord the ones telling us that." The younger maid balked and looked ready to disagree but with a single look the Strongest Queen silenced her. "You already confirmed that your King is present and it is of utmost importance that he meets with Lord Emiya. Or do you speak for the whole Phenex as a whole?"

There was no way a simple Pawn, a Low Class devil at that, could affirm that. "No! Not at all.

But of the members of the Phenex neither my King nor the Honorable Elder are... in condition to receive visits.”

Before his companion could say anything else, Shirou stated. “Maybe our visit can fix that, at least for the younger one.” He offered the maid of Phenex his best sincere smile. “I didn’t come here for a fight, I want to avoid one. Please, let me try to talk with Riser. Maybe he will hear my words...”

He already had an idea of what to say but first he wanted to take a proper measure of the man who was once the groom of his love. Shirou had no intention of starting any violence but he also knew the need of being ready for both the best and the worst. With how reluctant Marion was and Ravel hijacking her brother’s peerage he already expected the latter.

From the maid’s part she looked at the redhead with confusion. ‘Sure he doesn’t look as pompous as some magi but... that can be a trap.’ Yet she knew there was nothing to do if that was the case, not while Grayfia was still around. ‘Those red eyes are terrifying.’ Gulping up her fear, she stepped aside as magic opened the castle’s doors. “I will take you to my King. Please follow me.”

Inside the castle they went and the place looked empty but definitely not abandoned. The red on the walls retained its luster and the carpet was so clean one could eat on it. But there was plenty of space in the walls where stuff should be but everywhere was vacant.

While Shirou wouldn’t know exactly what was missing, Grayfia knew the Phenex Clan had accumulated a considerable number of statues and paintings over the years. She remembered a party once, when she was on vacation, where she spent a good part of it just admiring the art.

The whole castle once could be compared to a museum but that was in the past as without the profits from Phoenix Tears the Pillar took a large hit in their finances as they had little to no other source of money.

Not hard to believe as their Territory gave nothing on taxes since only members of the Clan lived there and the place was as inhospitable as they could for a civilized area of the Underworld.

Even if Rias offered them a break from tribute the damage was already done as the life of luxury the Phenex Clan once held became unsustainable pretty quickly. They also incurred some debts from the sudden lack of funds so their art needed to be sold or else collectors would knock on their doors faster than one could say ‘pay up’.

Grayfia would know as she and several in her King’s peerage would be the ones doing the deed, didn’t stop her from buying several pieces of art at low price once the Phenex Clan entered in decline.

Eventually they stabilized their finances but that wasn’t demonstrated in the state of their castle. The Strongest Queen knew the signs of excess magic around the area which

sustained its pristine appearance. Shirou's nose could be failing him but her senses were sharp as always.

All indicated a lack of personnel to take care of the place, a cost cutting measure the Phenex Clan had taken, choosing to maintain their home with their peerages and no outside help.

Since not everyone was cut out to be a maid, it wasn't surprising shortcuts were taken to maintain the seat of the Phenex Clan's power clean and presentable. No matter how much political capital they had, if they were the first Pillar to lose their ancestors' home after the Civil War, it would be humiliating.

Arriving at a specific hallway of the castle it was possible to see fifteen doors, seven on each side and one at the end. Some of those were opened and Shirou couldn't help but take a peek at some of the rooms as they walked by. He didn't see much even if one was a bit of a mess as they all looked normal rooms if a bit on the opulent side.

Didn't take him much to guess who the owners were anyway. 'This whole hallway is for Riser and his harem.'

Marion looked at the redhead hesitantly before a glance at Grayfia told her that she didn't really have a choice but to open her King's door. "Lord Riser has been..." She cleared her throat to buy herself some time. "After his defeat my King hasn't been in the best spirits. Please, I beg you to be patient."

"How is he? Really, I mean?" Shirou asked kindly. "I promise to not use what you are going to say against him so just be honest. Please."

The maid refused to take the invitation at face value. "If I was to speak my mind, I would have little to say to you and none of it polite." He flinched at her tone and upon seeing that Marion couldn't help but sigh. "Maybe it would be easier if you were someone easy to hate... Riser has been depressed as of late because of his defeat at Rias' hands." Her tone changed to one full of love if not sad. "While he is perfectly capable of taking care of himself, he hasn't left our wing of the castle since then."

"Has he been eating or exercising?" That time it was Grayfia who asked in a passive tone.

"Not much..." Clearly the brunette's tone grew angry and frustrated. "And not enough. I mean, I love Riser but... It would be easier to say I loved the man he was."

Fidgeting in place, Shirou decided to say. "He is still there. Just needs something to kick himself into gear." And he had just the right thing if Riser proved himself too stubborn.

While his words sounded reassured, the maid took offense. "Trust me, we tried plenty to get our King up and going again. He just feels defeated because Rias Gremory wouldn't know a good thing if it danced in her way." Anger poured from the girl but for that the magus had no sympathy. "And to make matters worse she had to use everything to damage our Clan-

"Don't pretend you all didn't have your part to play in this." The Mage of Swords' voice

silenced the devil and she felt like there was a sword at her neck. "It wasn't her who looked for that fight, she was just the one who finished it and I won't allow you or anyone here to insult Rias in my face." Like if a switch was flipped, he was smiling kindly again. "With that said, let's try and get your King moving, shall we?"

Fearfully Marion turned to open the door as Grayfia offered an approving smile to Shirou who glanced at her beautiful face before focusing on ahead once more. He expected a burst of heat when the door had opened but the place felt more comfortable than the rest of the castle by far.

And neat as well as despite the visible mess of a bed which had someone beneath its sheaths the whole room was better taken care of than the rest of the castle. The culprits were the two maids who quickly began to whisper to each other in the corner of the room. Riser's other Pawn, Burent, looked distraught but with just a few words Marion convinced her there was nothing they could do but let things play out.

With long strides and strong steps to make some noise, Shirou approached the bed swiftly. "Riser-san... It is me, Emiya Shirou. I don't know if you remember but I am the Magician of Gremory." The bulge beneath the sheets didn't move for anything other to show the one beneath was still breathing. "I understand that your Clan and I have had our differences," they tried to kill him and then tried to force his then friend and later lover into a marriage she didn't want so he was being overly generous, "but I came here today to see you. Can we talk?"

Counting to ten in his head the redhead was mildly disappointed there was no change from the other man but not surprised. He Projected a chair on the side of the bed and sat down comfortably to try a few more things before trying his last resort.

Before that he wanted to try and appeal to the brother Riser was. "Your sister is getting in a fight she can't win with your peerage. A match against Rias. Ring any bells?" The presence beneath the sheaths grew quiet and uninterested, Shirou could tell. "Riser, you lost that fight already. It is almost the same fight."

Both Pawns took offense to his words. "That is not true!"

"Yes, our friends are-"

"Ssh." Grayfia raised a finger to her lips with a harsh look and they grew silent.

Ignoring everyone else, Shirou let out a sigh and tried again while addressing the maids at the same time. "Do any of you think Rias Peerage didn't grow stronger over the last few months?" At the surprise in Marion's face and the confusion in Burent's, the redhead almost face palmed. "Right, well, they did. Or didn't you watch the last match?"

Burent looked at Grayfia first and when the silver haired maid nodded, she answered. "We have been busy taking care of our King while the others prepared to teach that bitch, Gremory, a lesson."

It took a lot to get Shirou angry but he was good enough to hold most of it back even if he didn't bother to hide a scowl. "Guest or not, please don't insult Rias in my presence again." With that he looked back at the hidden Riser, half tempted to rip the red sheaths apart and drag the devil off the bed. Once again he demonstrated restraint by trying to talk. "Look, I know you must care about your sister. Lending her your peerage, with how much you care for each other, proves that much."

At least from what he observed as if the maids were an example then all women in Riser's harem deeply cared for him. For all the flaws the Mage could attribute to the third son of the Phenex, he was loved and that said a lot. His women were healthy and fought for him while in the guise of fighting for his sister.

But that itself was dangerous because, in Shirou's opinion, nobody considered the kind of danger Ravel could walk in if she allowed the power to go over her head. Considering she was challenging Rias after harming Seekvaira he was right as the only reason the girl might walk out alive was because of his actions.

"You know, I have a sister too. She is also doing stuff that I don't approve of, dangerous stuff. More dangerous than just playing 'Underworld politics'." Shirou rested his elbows on the royal sized bed, waiting for any reaction. "Maybe it is a brother thing that we just want to protect them from any harm, even if in my case Illya is my older sister, but we must also be there for them when they fall. Be there to stop them from doing something they will regret for all their lives." Still no reaction. "Riser, Ravel is going to die if things keep going like this. Even if not because of Rias today, it will be someone else tomorrow."

That did the trick. "Ravel is smart." His voice was hoarse, lacking his previous confidence and arrogance. "Yubelluna and the others will protect her."

"Rias had her sign a contract, Riser. A proper Geas, when she loses Ravel will have to pay the price. If you aren't there... What is stopping your peerage from following her footsteps?" Shirou asked firmly but the man still remained hidden. "You need to take control of the situation or else you will find yourself alone after half a dozen contracts take everyone you love. Worse even, it will be after they fight for you until they can't anymore."

Apparently his words were having an effect as the hidden blond grew somewhat agitated if his movement was any indication. Yet Shirou was hit by a wave of disappointment as instead of revealing himself, or even saying anything else, Riser seemed content to just turn around and ignore him.

If the Mage was anyone less patient he would have covered his face with his hands and groaned in loud frustration before properly giving up to leave the Phenex's son to his depression.

Yes, Emiya Shirou recognized depression for what it was even if he never suffered from its effects. The lethargy, unwillingness to do anything and the forced way the man spoke told the magus Riser wanted to do absolutely nothing. If anything, the state of the room and the fact he had people watching over him were the only explanation of why the place wasn't any sort of mess.

Cue to the Mage of Swords to debate between trying to appeal to the devil's better nature and desire to help his sister or to bring out the desperate option he wasn't sure was going to work.

Patience or not, and since he really didn't know how to deal with depression of any kind, Shirou let out a sigh before saying, "I am the one who took Rias' virginity."

Things moved in slow motion the second the words left his lips, easily enough he noticed the surprise on the Phenex Pawns' faces but all his attention was on the flaming fist that flew towards his face.

Having enough time to deliberate about the attack or not, Shirou decided to take it, his head pushed to his left as flames tried to cook his flesh. "You get one. Only one." The Mage commented nonchalantly, ignoring the sting from the Fire while raising a hand to stop Grayfia from acting.

By the hatred on Riser's face it wasn't hard to believe the blond would challenge the Ultimate Maid, meager power or not. "You bastard! It is your fault! It is all your fault!!" Not even phased by the older man's anger, Shirou found more interest in how the pureblood devil let a beard grow despite fire flying from his mouth. Took him that much to realize the Phenex devils' hair was immune to fire as Riser kept screaming in his face. "Because of you Rias- she broke our engagement and-"

"Now hold on." Gently, Shirou pushed the older man's hand away from his face before saying. "She already didn't like the idea of marrying you before even knowing me. Hell, she made a Pact with me to get rid of that-" The reminder he was the Mage of Gremory only made the blond attack but that time the redhead grabbed the fist. "You only had one free hit, Riser. I would thank you if you stopped trying to burn me too so we could have a conversation."

Ignoring the olive branch, the pureblood devil hissed, "Get out of my house. Get out! You aren't welcomed here!" The man rose to his feet on the bed and Shirou wasn't phased neither for his size nor the polka dot underwear he had. "From now on you are my sworn enemy and I will-"

"For the love of everything sacred, did you even hear her? Ever tried to listen to her? She said 'no'!!" Shirou roared with anger, patience finally spent. "You didn't try to get to know her, you didn't try to talk to her. Automatically, because your parents said so, you thought she had to marry you when that couldn't be farther from the truth! All she wanted was to be heard and you didn't listen!" Taking several breaths the Mage folded his legs before continuing. "She didn't lie in the Rating Game, she wanted to be free. I am just the lucky one that she loves because she found me worthy of that love. A marriage with you would be a prison and that would be worse than death."

Riser gritted his teeth but couldn't disagree with the words, not while remembering the emotions Rias poured in their Rating Game or her willingness to abandon her birthright just to not marry him.

In many ways the devil was still stuck in that moment and couldn't help but accept the truth, sitting on his bed with crossed legs as he glared at the man who took something he had wanted for years.

The two men stared at each other and even Riser's Pawns would admit it was hard to know who was the noble in that interaction. Their King, despite his position, was sitting in an undignified manner with only a pair of briefs to protect his decency. On the other side the Mage of Swords, in a red shroud and a black armor, looked like a prince from a fairy tale.

Still the two sides faced one another for a few minutes, one with a glare while the other held a serene calm. Their gazes mirrored their thoughts as Riser truly wanted Shirou gone but found no excuse to expel him while the magus waited for the devil to face reality.

If they had more time, he certainly would wait the whole day if needed. "Ready to go try and protect your sister?"

"She is going to win." Riser said with absolute confidence. "Last time I lost because of a trick. Ravel won't fall for something like that."

"Then consider going to see her win." Shirou offered, in a change of tactics. "Winning or losing, I don't think your sister will complain if you are there for her." His last argument was the more piercing one. "Go there and show some love to your sister and your lovers. I am sure any of them will appreciate some consideration... Especially considering you dug yourself in your room over the last few months if I am understanding everything right."

Cruel as it was, the words and tone were a clear reminder to Riser he wasn't at his best, the devil getting the message before looking at himself. The beard was the least of his troubles as he body had lost the muscles any proud pureblood devil should have. Even his magic felt weak due to lack of practice.

Also he was basically naked in front of Lucifer's wife and if Sirzechs wasn't as chill as he was, Riser would be dust by the end of the night. "Tch. You are right." But before anything else the blond turned to his Pawns, technically his last remaining Pieces, and spoke, "Burent, Marion, sorry for having given you so much trouble." He scratched his head, noticing the longer hair with a frown. "And for being a mess."

"It is alright, Riser!" Burent approached first but the relief in her smile was visible. "We are just glad you are back."

"You are back, right, my King?" Marion asked next and the Phenex son didn't hesitate to nod.

"Yes! Enough for feeling bad about myself. Rias, clearly, didn't want me and I shouldn't care since I have better girls with you all."

'Let him have this.' Shirou reminded himself with a small smile as the pureblood embraced his happy Pawns. 'He is moving on and his words are for them, let them have this.'

When the redhead erased his chair and moved to the door, Grayfia offered him another smile. "A good job, Emiya-sama."

"Don't think this is over, human!" Riser pointed at him with some of his missing arrogance revived. "I still consider what you did a grave offense since you took Rias' virginity while she was my fiance."

"How did you know that?" Because Shirou was sure he avoided giving a time frame. Sure enough it was implied and if Riser just suspected, the question was pretty much a confession.

He had to hold on a chuckle as the girls glared at him with the same intensity as their King who spoke, "I figured that gave her confidence to fight like that and I was right!"

"What? No, she... you know what? I am not doing this." Fair to say his patience was spent and by Grayfia's understanding smile it was at an acceptable point. "Put on some pants and let's get going. We have a game to watch Rias win."

"You mean 'Ravel win'." But Riser got the message and moved to the bathroom as his maids collected some clothes. "My sister will free the Phenex Clan from the Gremory's tyranny. Just you wait!"

The three entered the bathroom which made Shirou's frown. "What are the odds of-"

"If they take more than ten minutes we will remind them that making us wait is not advisable." The Ultimate Maid was the image of serenity. Yet by the power she was preparing it looked like the gray haired Queen was ready to demolish half of the castle. "Are you sure that Rias' victory wouldn't be enough to settle everything?"

Eyebrows shot up when the Mage recognized the familiar tone the maid used. That wasn't the Strongest Queen in that moment but Grayfia, wife of Sirzechs and Rias' sister in law. Unlike his father, the shift on the woman was far more subdued and almost undetectable but it was there.

"Oh, I know very well that when Rias' win there are going to be a few other things to settle." He held no illusions that getting Riser out of his funk would solve everything with the Phenex Clan even if they had their monopoly back. At least most of it. "But that will stop his Pieces from seeking vengeance."

"And if he tries to do so himself?" While she hadn't read the magical contract, Grayfia was smart enough to guess what may be written. She also paid close attention to every word the Mage spoke about the subject.

"One step at a time, please." Shirou really hoped it wouldn't come to that. "Besides, I wasn't lying; Ravel should show her best to her brother, to her whole family. Maybe with everyone giving their all, we can all leave satisfied."

For the first time a look of disappointment rose on Grayfia's face. "That is just a fantasy."

"Yes, I know. But it isn't a crime to try and bring it to life."

...

In a match where the two sides were wary of the other pulling any sort of clever maneuver it wasn't odd for them both to behave similarly in an attempt to outsmart or outplay their opponent.

Distance was both a blessing in a curse as it meant there could be some time before any action happened but it also could be used to buy time for new plans. Of course that fact could only be considered relevant when the participants were slow or unable to travel from a point of the map to another.

So it wasn't odd when the 'grace period' had ended that both Kings sent their Pieces out in several directions of the huge battlefield to execute their plans. Positions needed to be considered, plans changed because of the terrain. But orders were going to be executed and the two sides sent their troops to attack the enemy.

Or intercept the opposition like it was the case of two Knights who met around the east corner of the map. While there wasn't a road that region had the fewest obstacles which benefited the fast Pieces traveling through it without risk of being shot down. Just some rocks and fire being expelled from the ground wouldn't even be a hassle.

Swords collided the second they caught a glimpse of each other as no questions needed to be asked. It was an initial prodding, one that transitioned in several slashes and parries, ending with the sides jumping away from each other.

"I didn't expect to face you again so soon." Kiba confessed, his faithful Holy Eraser firm in his grip as he jumped back a few more steps to watch his opponent.

Said opponent had a smile of glee in her face. "It must be Fate. Now we can have a real fight!" Declared the Knight of Phenex, Karlamine, who looked exactly as he remembered but lacking a Noble Phantasm and holding a two edged sword in her right hand. She also had a new weapon, a shield that she took from her back and raised it up with her left. "This time there won't be anyone to get in our way. Prepare to be defeated, Kiba Yuuto!"

Fixing his posture, Kiba replied, "We shall see," while studying the woman's new shield.

It was a Heater shield, the sort of thing big enough to protect Karlamine's whole body leaving only her boot clad legs and head exposed. The shield itself felt special even if not particularly powerful, with a huge fire bird, obviously a phoenix, painted on the front and emanating magical energy.

'Enchanted with defensive spells? Possible...' Kiba couldn't deliberate further as the short haired woman charged at him shield first.

Caution won out and the blond took several steps back to observe the attack. Kiba half expected his opponent to open her wings to extend it but instead she pulled her shield to the side and threw a stab. A simple one and easy to block, too easy to not be a feint as Karlamine proved by spinning on a foot to bash his skull in with her shield.

Only that Kiba was well aware of the bait and had jumped over the follow-up attack, delivering a kick on the other Knight's back. He didn't even bother to land as his wings were unleashed and he moved to cut her back but the Phenex Knight was well aware of her blunder and positioned her sword just in time.

Steel clashed and the brown haired woman's position was less than ideal so she tried to run ahead to escape the attacker. Transitioning from the air to the ground, Kiba kept up with the woman perfectly, their swords losing contact with each other for milliseconds and no more as sparks fell on Karlamine's back.

Not that she could feel them as her armor blocked all the damage and her skin was used to worse. What troubled her was the position of her arm which was extremely uncomfortable, especially when a stronger opponent kept pressing. To gain some space she tried another spin, trusting her armor to take the blow.

It barely worked as Kiba's blade almost reached her skin but her back's armor did its job even if she lost her balance and dropped to her knees after. The blond didn't miss that mistake and advanced but Karlamine slammed her shield on the floor to force a burst of flame around her.

Not immune to heat, the Knight of Gremory stopped his advance and began creating a sword to deal with the friends, however, "I see you are enjoying the field advantage."

The female knight clicked her tongue and stood up, shield raised back up as the fire around her diminished. "Only fair since the last time we fought in your school." Both knights wondered if she was telling that to him or herself by the scowl she had. Yet resolve shone in Karlamine's eyes. "En garde, Kiba! This time there will be no interruptions or outside interference! I will do my duty as my King's Knight and take you down before proceeding to your King!"

Kiba nodded in understanding. "Pretty much what Buchou expected." That made the brown haired woman raise an eyebrow. "The reason I am here is not because of Fate, I am here to deal with any advanced force."

"Pftthahahahaha!" Karlamine couldn't help but laugh, surprising her opponent. "Then you already failed!" Her confident grin gained a challenging undertone. "We learned from our last match and our mistakes, this time you guys won't have room to play your tricks!" Fire burst from her sword as she charged. "And our victory starts with your defeat!!"

That time the shield remained high as the woman advanced and tried to slash Kiba's face with her flaming sword. He dodged the first strike with a duck but Karlamine brought her blade back and the fire connected with his shoulder. The Knight of Gremory quickly abandoned the blazer, revealing the summer uniform beneath as the fire sword came back.

Not willing to risk getting burned again the blond blocked the strike but easily realized his mistake as the Knight of Phenex threw herself forward to try to hit him with the shield which also was quickly enveloped in flames.

Just before being touched by the fire Kiba jumped back with all his strength to buy a few more instants as another blade appeared in his left hand, one Karlemine recognized. **“Jet Sword!”**

The blast of mana broke them apart as the shield took the hit, giving the woman time to recover and pursue with a roar of determination. For his part the blond studied his situation for a second before stabbing his newly created sword down and pushing mana on it just as his adversary was about to strike.

Flames exploded around them but both easily escaped, Karlamine offering him a grin. “That is how you do it!” With that both had figured the place they were standing was full of flames hiding beneath the stone, just waiting for the right pressure to pull them out. “Now it is fair!”

“If you say so.” Kiba replied with a smile as both of his hands moved to Holy Eraser. While he managed to understand a little of the terrain, the similarities of it with the Phenex Territory gave his fellow Knight most of the advantage. “Any idea what is beneath our feet or are you just guessing as well?”

“A sleeping volcano, maybe a cave of fire. It doesn’t matter!” Pointing her sword at her opponent, Karlamine unleashed a blast of fire that should be impossible with her meager reserves. The battlefield was really benefiting her. “What matters is you getting cooked alive!”

Kiba rolled to the side in a dodge but had to start running as the flaming sword came for a swing too fast for its size. Seeing an opening, however, the Gremory Knight accelerated straight for the woman with his sword posed to pierce her arm. The plan failed when she easily let go of her magic and raised her shield to block.

Fortunately for him there was little chance of a counter attack as the blow exploded in the shield and sent Karlamine several meters away from him, much to her surprise. ‘How is he so fast?’

A surprise that was noticed as Kiba managed to read her face. “What is wrong? Shield not working?” Accelerating again the blond managed to get on the female Knight’s side and despite hitting the shield again he could see she was struggling. “You look used to it but maybe a shield isn’t for you!”

“Shut uuuup!” She pushed back with all of her strength before grumbling. “This isn’t like that Noble Phantasm. I can use my shield just fine.” Giving her counterpart a glare she added. “Shield and sword are the best combo for a knight,” she hit it twice with gauntlet and sword for good measure, “the versatility it gives me is greater than just a sword or even two!”

“Sounds like a skill issue to me.” Kiba couldn’t help but taunt and by how a vein popped on the girl’s forehead it was working. “But hey, if you think it is that great, you can try and defeat my lonely sword.”

Both charged at the same time as their battle continued, the first of several which were already starting on that fiery battlefield.

...

Speed wasn’t just the privilege of Knights for while they could get boosts from their Pieces, other devils could be just as fast or even faster through their own means. Especially when they had jets in their back and wings far larger than the average denizen of the Underworld like the Red Dragon Emperor.

‘This place is kinda nice, actually.’ Ise thought just before a geyser of lava was about to hit his body. He managed to freeze in place just in time. “Uwhauza!”

[You just say that because Scale Mail protects you from the heat. Yet you are still afraid of some lava.] Ddraig sighed in his Partner’s head. [Well, this isn’t the time to take a nice bath.]

‘Wait, hold on, I can take a bath in lava?’ To say Ise was curious would be an understatement. Yet he didn’t dare to try as he was under orders to move towards the enemy fortress as soon as possible.

Few devils would be capable of destroying the whole thing by themselves but he was the Red Dragon Emperor, both Host and the Original convinced Rias that Boosting enough to do the feat safely wasn’t just possible but absolutely viable with his actual power.

Still she gave him a route and specific orders and as the loyal Pawn he was Ise wasn’t going to take a dip into lava which would contradict some of those. ‘Wait, you said something like that back in Dragon Territory, right? But you didn’t tell me I could really do that!’ Because it sounded too cool and he really wanted to try.

[Because you only got strong enough to survive those sorts of temperatures by the tail end of it.] Ddraig replied as they both directed the wings and jets to propel the devil forward. They traveled through a huge river of lava that ran far enough to leave the Gremory fortress and ended just as closely to the enemy one. [At least with my scales, in other words, my magnificent self. On your own all you will accomplish by dropping in lava is- Oh~ We have company and she is well armed.]

Ddraig coaxed Ise’s body to stop and gently directed his head up to see a devil also flying in the chasm but at a higher attitude, far more cautious about the lava on the bottom or the ‘waterfalls’ around the walls.

Obviously the first thing Ise focused on was the diamond shape window of her white cheongsam that gave everyone a nice view of her chest and cleavage but his developing instincts managed to direct some of his attention to the weapon on her back. “Isn’t that-”

[A dragon's aura. A Dragon Slayer weapon.] Both were referring to the huge dark red scimitar on the woman's back which filled both of them with a sense of dread. A sense of dread any dragon should feel when facing such a weapon. [If I was to guess I would say that weapon was bathed in the blood of a dead dragon. Not a strong one, mind you, but enough to make that weapon a real bother if it catches you off guard.]

Hearing the Red Dragon Emperor's observation caught the woman's attention and she looked down at them with a frown before gritting her teeth with anger before settling for a look of disappointment.

The woman lowered herself to their level before talking, "I was hunting for that brat Rook but my orders are to take you down, Red Dragon Emperor!"

"'Brat Rook'? You're talking about Koneko-chan?" It clicked in the Pawn's mind a moment after. "Wait a minute, she beat you in our last game."

With a look of pure malice she replied, "She got lucky! Something you didn't do, Hyoudou Issei!" The woman announced while drawing her huge scimitar, a sword as tall as she was.

"Hehe! Koneko-chan can kick my ass on a bad day!" He raised his fists in a boxing stance as his wings spread for more mobility. "But you don't have a shot! Dragon Slayer sword or not... By the way, what is your name?"

If she wasn't already furious over her last defeat that would have the woman setting with rage. "My name is Siris you bastard!"

"Whoa, whoa. Calm down, we never talked before." The only time Ise and her were in the same room was back on the ORC when Riser introduced his harem and remembering that made the brown haired boy angry. "Not my fault you all were all over the Fried Chicken!"

"How dare you insult lord Riser like that!"

"Hah! You know he's a Fried Chicken!" He shot back as Siris knew exactly who the nickname was referring to.

In turn making the Knight of Phenex even madder as her sword lit up in flames. "You bastard! You are going to pay for that!" An explosion of fire was unleashed from the sword making it even bigger. Ise was quick to raise his guard as the woman raised her sword above her head. "Grr... Aaaaaahhhhh!!"

The armored warrior watched as the fire focused on the tip of the sword before shooting up, his eyes following the projectile until it exploded several meters above his head. Again his instincts warned him of peril and the young man lowered his gaze to see Siris flying in his direction with her huge sword completely pulled back for a huge swing.

Fist met sword as their power clashed but Siris wasn't done as she pushed her giant scimitar with her shoulder to force a disengage and moved around the side to strike Ise's shoulder which he dodged back but all it did was force her to transition to an downward slash.

Only to fail again as the armored Pawn hit the weapon with his other hand, a laugh escaping his lips. "Hahaha! Thought just because you had a Dragon Slaying weapon you would get me! No way!" He charged mana on his hand and counterattacked, "**Dragon Shot!** That 's right! Leave it to Issei-sama to teach this wannabe Dragon Slayer a lesson!"

His opponent dodged, leaving the Dragon Shot to collide on the river of lava which shot several tones of the dangerous substance up in front of the Red Dragon Emperor. Ise barely acknowledged it as he focused on watching his opponent move around, waiting for an attack. It wasn't immediate as she began to move in zigzag to escape his sight.

Not something he was going to complain about as that only made her breasts jiggle the right way. [I know she isn't really a threat but you could focus a little more.]

'Relax, Ddraig. If she wants to show off, I have a duty to watch.' While pleased with his logic that didn't mean the pervert wasn't paying attention to the woman as she began to move around him. The armored Pawn moved in the same rhythm, never presenting Siris his back. 'But seriously, Fried Chicken's so lucky for having girls like her all the time. Ufff, I wish I was fighting him!'

Siris saw the annoyance on his posture and shot herself at him with all her speed as mana flowed in her sword. She was a Knight directed to defeat Rooks, her specks to break defenses were the third best of her whole peerage. Magic and speed had assured her many victories against people who could shrug off cannon balls easily.

And the Scale Mail proved to be stronger than all of them as Ise's fist collided with the Dragon Slaying scimitar without even suffering any damage. [Oi, Knight! You really think a weak sword like that can damage my scales?] Ddraig asked as he pushed more power in his Partner's arm, pushing Siris back. [I would be laughing if I wasn't so offended.]

"Ohh, now you pissed Ddraig off." Ise said playfully before raising his other arm. "That means I use both HANDS!!!!" With that he threw a punch that the woman wasn't fast enough to dodge and ended up flying towards the river of lava. "Game-" But Siris recovered with a burst of speed before touching the magma, executing a flip to save her feet before landing on a huge rock. "-over? Okay, that was cool."

Instead of a reply the black haired woman accelerated again but diagonally from the Red Dragon Emperor's direction. Ise decided to meet her in the middle to finish with the match faster but Siris was flying low and used her sword to direct her mana on the lava, forcing it to burst up.

Dodging around the improvised geyser, the Pawn of Gremory couldn't help but lose the sight of his opponent. "Where did she go?"

[Feel her sword, Partner. You should be capable of as much.] Because Ddraig had already located the Knight.

Something the devil noticed. "Couldn't you just-" From the corner of his eye he saw the

attack coming and raised his arms just in time to take the blow. "Shit!" The impact was great and Ise utterly failed in stopping himself from hitting the side wall of the chasm.

Noticeable for Siris, however, was that Scale Mail didn't have a scratch. "Tch."

[It takes time for us to communicate so you would do well to learn to feel those things.] Ddraig commented as he was still kind enough to direct their wings to protect Ise's back. They sunk into the rock and halted his momentum before fully hitting the wall. [By the way; she is coming again.]

The warning was unnecessary as Siris wasn't subtle when coming back for more, sword above her head, a battle cry in her throat and a lot of power pouring on her blade. However it was nothing to Ise who raised his arms once again and blocked the hit with just some push back as the wall on his feet cracked. As the Knight grunted in frustration the Red Dragon Emperor bashed her weapon away and jumped off the wall.

Siris held onto her sword with all her might as even if there wasn't a single scratch on the Scale Mail it was the only thing she had that could equalize the fight. Except that 'equalize' was too generous of a word as the Red Dragon Emperor moved faster than the Knight could react and hit her side, sending her into the chasm.

Blood poured from the Phenex Knight's mouth and she felt several ribs cracking but refused to let go of her Dragon Slaying weapon. Still Ise wasn't taking chances anymore and threw another punch to her head to finish their fight. Only that it was her turn to surprise him as ducked just in time to avoid the hit and his fist sunk in the wall.

Without a drop of hesitation Siris kept diving in free fall and only opened her wings a few centimeters above the lava, a risky maneuver considering how dizzy she was because of the previous hit.

Removing his arm from the wall Ise watched as fire and lava began to pour from the small opening. "Goddamned! Is this actually Hell or something?"

[I bet the architects of this arena went all out on hazards since the place is full of lava.] Ddraig pointed out appreciatively. [Makes me wonder if somewhere in the Underworld is actually like that or just similar.]

Turning around to find his opponent, the Red Dragon Emperor opened his mighty wings. "Didn't Buchou say this place looked like Phenex Territory or something?" His back exploded with green energy and in an instant the Pawn had covered the whole distance the Knight had covered in her escape attempt.

Of course Siris tried to accelerate and escape again but it was in vain and all she could see was the image of a red dragon about to crush her. Worse even was that with lava below it was fair to say the black haired woman was afraid. The Red Dragon Emperor truly was an intimidating opponent she shouldn't be facing on her own.

Which was why she would be eternally grateful when both heard the battle cry from another

woman, one that distracted Ise from his prey and had him looking up to see a familiar figure in red and white descending in his direction.

However he had other concerns as Ddraig was quick to point out. [Another Dragon Slayer weapon?] He was referring to the spear the blue haired girl was aiming towards Ise's head.

The Pawn of Gremory didn't retreat nor hesitate, focusing on the same deed as before as his fist collided with the weapon's blade. Much like with the black haired woman, the blue haired one was shocked that her weapon didn't even break his knuckles scales.

"Like an overgrown tooth pick's going to beat me!" The Red Dragon Emperor pushed back with a roar and the woman was sent flying. For good measure he channeled fire over his mouth piece, a process way faster and easier thanks to the heat of the battlefield, and let out a huge fire ball aiming to consume the two Phenex Pieces.

"Mira!!" Siris called for her ally, holding her scimitar with a hand below the blade.

"Got it!" The blue haired woman, Mila, landed on the weapon and used it for balance as she spun her spear so fast it was like she was about to take off like a helicopter.

What actually happened was that she managed to capture Ise's fire with her magic and use her weapon's speed to deny it any sort of air. Without fuel the flame couldn't exist so the fire ball disappeared but the red armored devil was already on them again and Mila tried to refocus her power into a barrier of any sort.

It worked because a magic circle formed a wall between her and the Red Dragon Emperor. Still he was the Red Dragon Emperor and his punch sent both women flying. Yet both also recovered rather quickly, a practiced maneuver even if Ise couldn't see it as such. They were just more experienced than him fighting on air.

[Boost! Boost! Boost!]

Still experience was little help against pure power and the Red Dragon Emperor had it in spades as the newest one started to take the fight seriously. He was willing to hold back against one opponent, he was taught by surviving in a forest that using all his energy at once was a terrible idea.

Against two, on the other hand, the brown haired Pawn had enough teachers who hammered in his head the idea of not pulling his punches when in disadvantage. It helped that Ise remembered Mira, remembered she was a Pawn like him, making his competitive spirit flare more than a little.

Hyoudou exploded with movement, flying around the two women and delivering several blows that threw them around until they separated despite their best efforts to do otherwise. Fortunately for him they were in the middle of a zone filled with lava and a Dragon Shot in the right place had them running in opposite directions.

With that Siris became his target once more and the armored warrior slammed his whole

body on her, sending the Knight of Phenex into another wall before turning around. Mira was already recovered, nevertheless sporting a burn in her arm, as Ise appeared in front of her and punched her gut.

She saw her vomit and couldn't help join his hands above her head for a final strike. A strike that was interrupted when several gusts of wind and fire slammed in his body. Neither caused any damage but it was enough to blind him and snap Mira out of her stunned state. The Pawn of Phenex escaped the hammer strike just in time to reach another member of her team.

Pale blue hair, dressed like a belly dancer with several silver accessories, Ise couldn't help but float there, struck by her appearance as lust and jealousy fought in his core. "Damn that Fried Chicken!!!"

Not caring nor understanding her opponent's anger, Mira landed beside her teammate with a grateful smile. "Thanks for the rescue, Shuriya!"

"I am the first to arrive?" The other Pawn asked with a concerned expression.

"No, the second. I was first. Siris was the one who called." Said Knight appeared as if summoned, dropping by her teammates with a bottle in her hand, dropping its contents on her right shoulder. "You're already using one?!"

"Lady Ravel gave us her Tears for situations like this." By her tone of voice the tallest of the three women was furious. "Also the scimitar is heavier than my zweihander. If I don't have both arms I won't be able to use this sword." She turned to the dancer with a frown. "Where are the others? I thought the plan was for us all to gang up on the Red Dragon Emperor."

"They are busy." The women found themselves surprised that it was Ise who responded as he rose from the chasm and landed on the other side of it, red mana blazing in his left hand. "Buchou told us to beat you all and I bet everyone else is already getting to fight!"

...

Ni and Li, Pawns of Phenex, nekomatas by birth, twins and considered by both their Kings as the strongest Pawns of their team, struggled to get a clean hit on their opponent. They were fighting in a rocky area with some holes that felt like furnaces but the heat didn't bother the duo.

What bothered them was that their adversary, a nekomata like themselves if the ears and tail were any indication, was having an easier time dodging their hits and countering despite being a two against one.

Ni had blue hair and red eyes. Li had red hair and blue eyes. Both had long hair that reached their thighs with the former having it into a ponytail while the latter had it on a braid with a ribbon. They also wore gloves and leg guards the color of their hairs which didn't match with their skimpy sailor outfit that left little to the imagination with short skirts and exposed midriffs.

Their opponent was no other than Toujou Koneko who had her own pair of black gloves and was using them to deliver an uppercut to the blue twin before dodging a kick from the red one to jump with a spinning kick of her own.

Indeed the three of them were born as nekomatas and the trio were applying Ki to their attacks but it was clear who was the most skilled user. Either because of her talent or training, Koneko's skill was far above Ni and Li's who recovered from the blows and stood on all fours while glaring at the little Rook.

"We need to get to the others, Li."

"She won't let us pass, Ni." Fixing their feet, both brought up their hands, covering them with touki before saying at the same time with smiles on their faces, ""We need to bring her down, nyaa!"

Contrary to her opponent's Koneko dropped on all fours, a similar smile on her face, "Come and get it, nyaa!" She wanted to cringe at her words. 'Yoruichi-oneesama is a bad influence.' Though the small girl, white Ki covering her body.

Seeing her energy and not just feeling it with their senses made the two Phenex Pawns hiss before they charged. Li, the red one, jumped on a rock and began to hop on several others while Ni rushed in a straight line towards their opponent. Unwilling to surrender initiative, the smaller nekomata charged at the blue one full speed.

While the smaller girl was faster, the other nekomata's senses were good enough to keep up with her speed. Both bared their fangs as Ni shifted her center of gravity to use her longer legs for a kick. Koneko dodged the blow but it wasn't the end of her attack as the blue haired Pawn used her two hands as support and unleashed a barrage of kicks with her other leg.

Some managed to connect but Ni felt her Ki breaking apart before doing any damage thanks to Koneko's mastery of the energy. True the younger nekomata was exactly that, younger, but she was trained by the strongest nekomata of their generation and had a monstrous talent to boot.

Talent so ingrained in her being that she couldn't even use demonic energy without calling for her Ki. Talent so great that even as her feet collided with her torso the blows did zero damage thanks to her skill and the armor beneath her uniform. Adding that to the results of her training, Koneko easily ignored the other woman's leg and delivered a powerful punch on the blue haired nekomata's face.

Ni almost lost her consciousness and was retired with that blow alone but saving her from the jaws of defeat was Li who raced from above, her fist covered in flame and eyes flaring with touki.

The redhead barely hit Koneko who leaned back just in time to escape the flaming fist and she deflected the second one by hitting the other nekomata's arm. Li didn't allow that to stop

her and while her control over flames wasn't good enough to light up her feet there was a lot of Ki around leg to throw an extremely strong kick at the smaller girl.

Unfortunately for her all that energy was wasted as the power vanished before making contact, much like her sister's. "Weak." Koneko taunted before hitting the braid haired girl's leg with her elbow, breaking the limb. "You two just have touki? Aren't you nekomatas too? Train more, nya."

Was an honest suggestion as the Rook moved closer to her opponent to grab her arm and slam her against the closest rocks. She prepared one more hit to finish Li off but the other nekomata unleashed her Element over her whole arm and back, forcing the white haired girl to take a step back with a frown.

And find another target as the long braid was free for the grabbing and Li could do nothing but scream in pain as Koneko used it to drag the redhead around before throwing her at a rock formation which exploded with the impact.

Hearing no judge retiring her opponent the Rook of Gremory accelerated in all fours to that position and just didn't attack immediately because the Pawn was buried underneath several tons of stone.

"Nyaa... Should I dig her out?" Koneko asked herself as there was a good chance her opponent passed out due to injuries or lack of air. A voice similar to Liz told her to make sure her target was out while one similar to Yoruichi whole heartily agreed. "Better safe than sorry..."

She began to get rid of some stones before her ears heard the sound of a glass bottle breaking and her tail jumped up as the sensation of Ki being used. The white haired Rook also detected another presence nearby but ignored the last one to focus on Ni who had used Phoenix Tears to heal herself.

Indeed the blue haired twin no longer had any wounds and was quick to explode into action to save her sister. Quite literally in fact as she channeled a huge quantity of Ki before converting it into an exploding flame to launch her towards Koneko at ludicrous speeds even for a devil.

In that moment the white haired girl took the first real hit of the match but countered quickly with her own Ki. Ni watched with horror as the flames of her body dispersed even as she pushed Koneko back, her strength failing once the younger nekomata expanded her own Ki.

White aura purged the orange fire but Ni refused to submit, focusing all her energy in her left arm before throwing the strongest hook she ever did in her life. However Koneko saw it coming and with a wave from her hand she dismissed the fire a second time before pushing the arm away.

Gold eyes focused on blue ones as the latter grew with panic. "You're scary." Ni couldn't help but say nervously but playfully, making the younger woman smile.

“Thanks.” Koneko unleashed several fast punches to add the retort.

Sure enough Ni did her best and fought back with all her strength and remaining Ki-

Ravel Phenex’s Pawn has retired after an absurd sequence of fists. All hail the superior Reincarnated nekomata Toujou Koneko!

-only for the warning to echo around the battlefield as Rias Peerage took first blood in the match.

But Koneko knew very well the fight wasn’t done since it was easy to deduce that if one twin had access to Phoenix Tears the other could do so as well. Considering the team was led by a Phenex that wasn’t odd even if it was slightly unfair against most teams. Most teams because Toujou would admit freely hers wasn’t like most.

Moving swiftly she saw Li had managed to free half of her body and was using a magic circle to collect a bottle. There wasn’t any need to confirm what it was but seeing it just made the nekomata accelerate further before halting her momentum to look towards her right.

Flying towards their location was someone Koneko was mildly familiar with as she remembered the approaching woman as one of the members from Riser Peerage she had defeated on her first Rating Game.

And the black haired woman wearing an elaborate kimono remembered her as well as the expression of anger. “Found you!” At a distance she had seen the terrain breaking apart, adding the announcement she figured out it was where Koneko was fighting. “This time you won’t catch me by surprise!”

The redhead nekomata dropped much of the bottle’s contents on her head before drinking the rest as she dug herself off with mild success. “Mihae, Ni was-”

“I heard!” Everyone had heard the announcement but the Bishop of Phenex could see her fellow Piece was in distress while diving from the skies. Creating two magic circles she sent blasts of fire towards the white haired nekomata who skillfully dodged them.

But the second circle didn’t fire, instead it filled the rocks around the Pawn with her mana which she used to make them all float, freeing her ally. Then she took advantage of her other magic circle and that mana was already circulating the stones to make them all catch fire before hurling them at Koneko at great speeds.

Like a meteor shower, or at least meteorites, the attack began to bombard the area around the Rook of Gremory who dodged and destroyed several of the rocks. But it wasn’t enough as Mihae did her best to add more stones to her attack with the intention of overwhelming the nekomata.

But the rocks being used were of the small variety and Koneko jumped around until she found a giant piece of stone to lift it up as a shield. Touki would make sure her newly

acquired protection would survive the rain of fire and she used it proactively by throwing it at Mihae.

The Bishop of Phenex couldn't believe how strong such a small girl actually was since the rock she threw was taller than an apartment. Still she had been defeated by the white haired devil in the past so she didn't even try to block the attack. Instead the black haired woman dove closer to Li, both watching how Koneko's stone destroyed a small mountain.

Mihae brushed it off an instant later and focused on using her spells to strengthen Li's body to her limits. "Did your sister use her Phoenix Tear?" The two shared the same pocket space so she had to ask.

"Nyah, just before she- Look out!" Thanks to her boost Li had grown as fast as their peerage knights.

A good thing too since it allowed her to escape Koneko's dropping kick that utterly demolished their previous position. Despite being carried by the nekomata, Mihae didn't stop her work and kept empowering the other woman. That was her duty as a support and the best thing she could do as the redhead placed her at a safe distance before jumping back.

Li managed to intercept Koneko, their fists clashing and making the area shake. Fire burst from stone all around the nekomatas and for the first time the redhead managed to stand against the younger one on an equal footing. Both glared at each other as they threw around several punches and kicks that caused several explosions.

Meanwhile the Pawn fought like mad the Bishop started to direct some of her magic towards healing as Mihae felt Li's bones breaking. 'What sort of creature did Rias Reincarnate?!' Because she refused to believe the nekomatas were from the same species. Koneko was just too strong. 'We need help! We need help badly! Unfortunately, I don't think we are getting any!'

Her thoughts were almost cut off when Koneko managed to deliver two fast punches on the redhead's face before sending a roundhouse kick towards her midriff. In a panic Mihae collected her Phoenix Tear and got ready to throw it at her ally before the bleeding Li raised an arm and got up to a knee.

By that moment Koneko had already stopped to say, "Since we are both nekomatas I will give you a chance to surrender, nyaa~."

"Nyaa, don't you mean 'were'?" Li asked while holding her side as Mihae worked her magic. Fighting against Koneko was turning out to be increasingly frustrating since the younger girl was easily nullifying all the Ki in her attacks. "You didn't do it for Ni..." It didn't help that devil healing was truly subpar even when used for Supporter Types. "She was out like a light before we counted to three, nyaa~"

"Didn't look like you two were going to surrender." The Rook offered with a shrug.

"Nyahaha! Course not! The Phenex Pieces don't quit!" The Pawn declared proudly before

adding playfully, "And these kittens also don't stay down."

A peppy attitude like that made Koneko laugh, "Nyahahaha! Fine, fine!" She dropped on all fours and her tail shot straight up. "Won't offer again~" Yoruichi was rubbing off on her too much.

When the two clashed again Mihae couldn't avoid a chilling thought. 'I should have gotten here sooner. We really could use Ni!' Certainly it would be difficult to empower two people but watching the redhead struggle against the Rook made something clear.

They could use the extra muscle.

...

On another zone of the battlefield, a wasteland with fire everywhere and little else, another pair of twins was suffering from a Rook's attention. "Using chainsaws as weapons is truly barbaric. A pity they aren't good weapons either. Ohohohoho!"

Luvia couldn't help but mock the green haired girls' weapons because they could barely count as such. Sure chainsaws were dangerous but even when using them as flamethrowers the two Pawns were too slow and weak compared to her. The former Edelfelt heiress laughed some more when one of the girls tried to throw the weapon at her.

Only for the blonde to catch the weapon by the handle and play with it while the flames around the blades dissipated. "Ohohoho! First rule of combat, children, make sure to bring something you can use."

"We ain't children!" Said one of the twins, Ile even thought Luvia didn't know nor care for which was which with the only difference being the location of the pony tails on their hair, as she closed her hands with anger and looked ready to cry.

Dressed as they were with gym uniforms composed of white t-shirts with blue accents, black leggings and sneakers, while also looking so small compared to her, it was easy for the magus to call them children regardless of what could possibly be their real age.

Perhaps if they were a little taller it would have made some difference because even without her boots the blonde devil was taller than the two by a couple of heads. Their personalities helped too as the turquoise haired girls charged at her arrogantly before learning who was the strongest of the three. Luvia could have finished them off at any time but since they looked down on her she was just pouring salt in the wound.

"You meanie. Meanie, meanie, meanie meanie!" Ile kept complaining while calling for a magic circle and drawing a blue bag for it.

"Oho~ ready to go to school?" Luvia was almost baffled when all the Pawn took from the bag was just another chainsaw. "... How immature you must be to not realize that won't make any difference? Should I teach you two some manners?"

With her new chainsaw the Pawn of Phenex was much calmer and confident. "Let's get her, Nel!"

"Let's rip her apart. Rip, rip, rip!" The other twin, properly identified as Nel, laughed loudly. "Two on one, she has no chance!"

"Are your delusions making you forget what happened barely a minute ago?" Luvia asked rhetorically before making a show of shaking her head just as she flicked away the chainsaw in her hands. With her strength the weapon basically left the area. "Very well. It is the duty of the nobility to teach peasants how to behave."

She was playing it up a bit and it worked perfectly as the two devils grew angry. "You ain't a noble!" Said Nel as they charged.

"Just a meanie!" Added Ile already in front of her sister, chainsaws bathed in flames.

Luvia, with hands behind her back, leaned back to dodge Ile's attack before she slid left to dodge Nel's. The later twin's attack hit the ground and a blast of flames exploded around the three but the magus wasn't bothered as she kept retreating back. Already the blond had analyzed the chainsaws when she grabbed the first and knew they were powered by mana despite the metal being normal.

Which meant the type of attacks they could use was rather limited. "Oh my, are you sure that is the right weapon for you to use?" She asked with a smirk as Nel swung her weapon, throwing a wave of flames in her direction. The attack was slow, so slow she just turned right and fully avoided it. "Seriously, you two would be better with a pair of knives or maybe sticks with your straw-like arms."

"Shut it!!" Ile jumped at Luvia and began to swing her chainsaw with reckless abandon. Every attack spit fire everywhere but it made little difference because the area was already burning and none hit Edelfelt.

"I mean, your arms are so thin. Do you two even," the blue magus ducked as Nel tried to get her from behind but all she did was hit her sister with a wave of fire while being hit by one herself, "practice with your weapons? Should we even call them weapons?" The blonde asked with condescending curiosity.

Both turquoise haired devils recovered and opened their wings before resuming their attack and by flying they gained a bigger range of movement to go with the chainsaws. Luvia kept smiling when the first twin dived trying to take her head and found herself struggling a little on her dodges.

When twin one went for her head the other aimed for the legs, when one aimed for her arms the other tried to hit the blonde's blind spot. There was no overlap anymore as they moved like mosquitoes but very coordinated, hitting and flying away always together. Sure enough Luvia kept smiling but she noticed how the fight was starting to ramp up.

And there was fire, more fire than before as with every pass the girls threw flames around

until it resembled a carpet around the magus and the aristocrat had no choice but doing a long jump to her right.

That was what the turquoise haired duo was waiting for and they charged at her together, chainsaws on the front and aiming for her torso. For the first time Luvia had to open her wings or risk herself being impaled and chopped to bits. After missing the twins separated and began to attack her again, basically forcing the blonde to land or deal with a tridimensional assault.

Only to realize she fell into a trap as Edelfelt found herself surrounded by fire. 'Well, at least they can't attack from below.' The ground was her best incentive to not fly and yet the magus would freely admit she was starting to feel the heat despite certain spells protecting her. "You two are quite good dancers, aren't you?"

The attacks had a certain rhythm and synchrony that only a team that knew each other their whole lives could pull off. They weren't just twins in appearance but it was like they shared the same brain in some moments. Not only that but it was noticeable how their positioning got better after they hit themselves once.

Also they no longer were failing for any provocation and instead began to circulate Luvia with eager smiles. "We got her, lle!"

"Time to chop this meanie, Nel!" They flew in a circle faster and faster as Luvia chuckled at their childish words.

"Didn't anyone teach you to not sing victory before winning?" Cracking her neck, the magus spread her arms and opened her legs while lowering her center of gravity. "I haven't attacked yet."

It was the only warning the twins would get as Luvia dived into the flames and grabbed one of them with a claw grip before slamming her face in a rock. The other tried to rescue her twin but only received a back hand for her troubles as the magus was more interested in her already captured prey.

Who was fighting back with punches and kicks which had absolutely no effect on the Rook's body. "meanie! Cruel! Big breasted monster!" Most of it was music to the magus ears but then the turquoise haired girl said the exact wrong thing. "Gorilla!!!"

It was a word that echoed in Luvia's ears several times and with a greater intensity than it should be possible. It was a word that brought back memories of the last year and a certain person who always managed to rile her up. It was a word that would assure that the rivals of red and blue would always be at each other's throats.

Reminded of a fellow magus who the Rook of Gremory wished to teach a lesson, and furious no matter how much she would want to deny it, the blonde decided to live some of her fantasies. "Let us have a lesson in good manners. First; make a reverence!" Luvia pulled her up until she was on her knees to slam her face down again. "Whenever in front of your

bettens you must always make sure to keep your head low and to show the proper respect!”

A shadow began to cover Luvia’s face and her eyes grew bright with mana as she made absolutely sure that the twin she had in her hand could fight back but it was in vain. As a Pawn she didn’t have the strength and Luvia wasn’t just being condescending when talking about their weapons.

‘These girls have some aptitude for magic... no, it is the battlefield. The heat, the fires around us, it made their attacks more dangerous than they should be.’ The blonde began to think with disappointment before raising the girl’s to look at her face. She was about to cry. “Ah~ don’t be like that. You can give up, you know?”

“Meanie! Gorilla!” A vein popped in Luvia’s head but she managed to hold her anger in. “We will make Gremory pay! We will help Riser!”

“While your capability is average, your determination leaves nothing to be desired.” If anything the blonde could recognize as much, surprising the turquoise haired girl. “Unfortunately for you, revenge is such a crude motivation.” She raised a hand and caught the other twin’s chainsaw by the blade mid swing, turning to give her a look of disappointment. “And this game is boring me.”

One of her many jewels on her fingers began to shine before the magus attacked, bringing the two together on the ground before slamming their heads on each other’s. She repeated the attack twice, leaving the twin devils stunned, before jumping back with mana already gathered in a blue sphere.

“At least I shall dismiss you with an attack worthy of note. Rejoice for you two earned the good graces of a noble!” Luvia declared before the blast was unleashed and consumed the two girls.

Ravel Phenex just lost two more Pawns in a single blow. Once again a Rook of the Gremory sows terror on the battlefield! But is she ready for the next challenger?

Luvia didn’t need the announcer to say anything, the boundary field she had created detected the new arrival just as she finished the twins. Her new opponent wasn’t stopping either and accelerated when the announcement of Ile and Nel’s retirement began, doing a flip and unleashing a powerful flying kick.

The collision between Luvia’s arms and Xuelan’s foot unleashed a powerful shockwave that extinguished all flames around them. But the attack wasn’t done as the black haired woman began to spin on the air unleashing a cascade of spinning kicks with great strength. The magus had to rotate her arms to mitigate the damage as more shockwaves exploded around them.

Eight kicks later Xuelan did a flip in the air to drop her leg on Luvia’s head but the blonde crossed her arms and blocked the blow. However the Phenex Rook wasn’t done as she repositioned before following up with a punch that the aristocrat dodged to the side before delivering a spinning kick.

The qipao dressed woman managed to recover and gracefully land as Luvia taunted her, "You were just a little bit too late."

"Hmph, not my fault. I expected Ile and Nel to be able to do better and not leave us to clean their messes." Despite her complaint, Xuelan was smiling. "Should have known better against you, against anyone in the Gremory, really."

"I can see why; they have to fight while you chooses to fight," after observing the other woman for a second she amended with, "loves to fight." Luvia said it with eagerness and borderline lust as she lowered her center of gravity and settled into a stance. "Despite your defeat to Ise in the last game, it wasn't due to incompetence..."

"Don't remind me of that. We were having such a pleasurable conversation." Xuelan changed her footing, raising a leg, to what would be called in wushu or kung fu, the Crane Stance. "The Boosted Gear was a challenge that I wasn't ready to face then but was eager to prove myself against it now. But first, I can't let someone as dangerous as you, unchecked."

"A wise decision. Honestly I find myself pleased that you chose to do so. Just reaching your fortress without opposition would be such a bore." Confessed the magus with a grin. It vanished with a memory of her last Rating Game, her last proper fight. "Besides, I want to teach my prowess against someone like yourself; a true martial artist."

Xuelan looked pleased, even more so when the magus who demonstrated a great deal of proficiency with magic the previous Rating Game chose to charge at her with bare hands and no spell in sight.

Sure there was still magic empowering her except that was true for both women. It was true to any devil and was a show of skill as much as their fighting prowess to use mana to strengthen every fiber of their being.

Quickly the blonde cut the distance to nothing, aiming a jab towards the other woman's face. Xuelan deflected with a hand and threw a kick at the same time. It was a fast kick with just the small intent of distracting Luvia by throwing her head back to try and force an opening. It failed completely as the magus saw it coming, seizing her leg with her other arm.

The first jab had been a feint as Luvia aimed to counter its counter but the maneuver didn't distract Xuelan for long. Aiming to free her leg before the blonde did anything, the black haired woman threw two punches just after her kick. They were fast and hit their mark but lacked enough strength to dislodge the opponent.

But were an excellent distraction which allowed for follow up as the Rook of Phenex demonstrated by a constant barrage of punches which the Gremory Rook had only an arm to defend against.

Still the magus made sure to not allow that sort of thing to go unpunished and broke her opponent's knee to prove that much. The qipao wearing devil winced from pain but the only

thing that left her mouth was a roar of fury as she unleashed her wings a second time to kick her adversary right in the face.

Against that Luvia couldn't help but fall back a couple of steps but it wasn't long before she charged back with several jabs and small punches that had Xuelan floating back. Because of her fighting style, the lack of a leg was truly detrimental so the Phenex Piece needed a distraction to recover.

Using her other leg she kicked the ground which opened a small hole allowing a burst of hot air to escape. It wasn't enough, she was facing a Rook much like herself and unlike most young Reincarnated devils the magus had no fear. She jumped through the small obstacle and delivered a double kick on the other Rook's chest.

Some ribs broke with the impact but Xuelan didn't fight against it, using the few seconds she gained to collect her Phoenix Tears with a grimace that grew more pronounced when Luvia asked, "Going for the last resort?"

Obviously the blonde was already closing the distance again so Xuelan spilled a little of the bottle on her knee and took a sip before throwing it back inside the magic circle. The healing wasn't complete, especially on the knee, but her ribs were restored so she raised her arms in time to block a left hook and push back before Luvia gripped another limb.

"Ohoho, so there went your trump card. I bet the two pipsqueaks before also had some Tears." Asked the magus with a smirk.

"We are the Phenex Clan." Was Xuelan rebuttal before she placed her right, and previously broken, leg back in favor of her left while raising her fists. It was an adjusted boxing posture with her arms farther from the body. "Didn't your King warn about our resources?"

Luvia dropped her guard, or made it appear she did, by placing her hands on hips. "Sure enough, lady Gremory did as much. The question really is how many of those bottles-"

Xuelan used her good leg to dash back into action and unleash a double punch aimed for Luvia's midriff and breasts. It was a fast offensive and would have caught many completely off guard but Luvia truly had left herself open on purpose to bait something like that. Her arms moved like a blur and she grabbed both of the black haired Rook's fists with a smile.

Only for the bad knee she had broken to hit her hip before Xuelan turned around while using the blonde's hold against her for a throw. Sure the magus let go when her feet began to leave the ground but by that time the Phenex Rook had grabbed a wrist and completed the motion.

A motion of which Xuelan placed all her strength on and unleashed an impact that not only exploded the ground but allowed more fire to escape in the area. Already considering the damage she took, the Rook of Phenex didn't hesitate to let go of her opponent and jump back to recover further.

From her magic circle, a familiar bottle appeared. 'Still have half...' She was about to drink it when a beam of mana destroyed the Phoenix Tears. "What?"

"If you are going to recover, make sure your enemy is properly down first and foremost." Luvia revealed herself with a chunk of mana focused on her back and her indicator pointing towards her opponent. "If you watched my previous match you know about **Cancer**, don't you?"

"You managed to use that spell-" Then Xuelan noticed that not only the flames weren't affecting Luvia but she also wasn't even wounded from her previous blow. "You were using magic from the start!!"

"Ohohoho! Of course I was. What sort of magus starts a fight without being properly prepared?" Luvia removed her left glove to reveal a ring on each finger, a sapphire in her indicator shining brightly. "These don't have much mana but the girls from before barely managed to touch me so Cancer remained mostly inactive."

"But then-"

"When you hit me, I made sure to pull the spell back just a tad. Just had to use it once before against a chainsaw. Which reminds me, thank... who was that twin again? Doesn't matter, thank them both." The Finnish magus revealed with a gleeful expression. "It was an excellent test to see how much control I truly have over Cancer and how it deals with constant damage, like against a chainsaw." The blonde smirked at seeing Xuelan's gritted teeth. "A pity none of you was skilled enough to notice. Maybe if you were a little more proficient in magic..."

"I don't- I can't-" Xuelan felt like everything she practiced and believed had been insulted all at once. Which wasn't Luvia's intention at all, she truly respected someone who dedicated themselves to their craft.

However Luvia Edelfelt was a magus, born in one of the oldest Families of Europe and raised from birth to be ruthless in combat and optimal in her negotiations. Or vice versa as those who went against her could attest. Regardless, the moment she crossed the two Pawns she had already defeated, Luvia had one of her spells ready, just in case.

The fact she had to reduce its energy output to keep it going when she was using one of her smaller gems was just her being efficient and the blonde would claim in front of a jury if necessary that her opponents' inability to sense her spells were their fault and not hers.

While such an argument would be welcomed and praised in the Clocktower and the Underworld alike, nevertheless it pissed Xuelan off. "Coward!!"

"Oh dear. Am I dealing with another uncultured young lady?" That time the magus was more respectful than with the twins because truly it wasn't her intention to insult the other woman. "Sorry but not sorry. This is a fight, after all." She waved her finger, taunting Xuelan. "Come and get me, if you disagree."

Fire exploded in her hands as Xuelan roared with fury before jumping back into the fight just as Luvia quickly put back her glove. Just in time as well since even with Cancer active she needed to raise an arm or be seriously hurt. At least of that she was sure as the explosion from the Phenex's Rook attack refilled the place with flames.

Still one punch wasn't enough for the black haired beauty who kept roaring and punching madly at the woman who insulted her pride. The fire around them grew more intense and began to join her attack as her fists kept colliding against the carapace of mana protecting the magus.

Every hit was strong and the heat in the area began to grow to new heights as fury was channeled into power. Emotions turned into adrenaline, adrenaline turned into energy, energy which was poured into more mana. There was no doubt to anyone watching that Xuelan was throwing everything she had against Luvia.

And she kept doing so for several minutes until the blonde felt the mana in her ring almost spent with a grin. "Well, well, well. You almost got this ring." A shift of feet later the magus was inside the older woman's guard for a shoulder tackle before locking her neck with a choke hold. It only made the Rook of Phenex fight harder with her fire covered hands. "Oh my, this is getting a bit too hot."

Luvia jumped, taking the other woman with her, before falling with Xuelan's back hitting the ground first. She did so before letting go of her enemy and jumping back as the kung fu practitioner managed to claw her face in.

Flame kept pouring from the black haired woman as she slowly got up, feeling her ribs once again damaged in the struggle. Drinking a sip of Phoenix Tears wasn't enough and it wasn't just her knee which was in trouble.

Yet her rage burned brightly. "You are... going to pay... for that!" More fire covered her hands and joining them together she unleashed a wave of flames much like from a cannon that consumed Luvia.

At that point the ring she was using was pretty much out of mana but just as the last drop was about to fall, "**Cancer!**" The magus commanded and the spell was activated by the ring on her middle finger.

Hearing the word and understanding its meaning, Xuelan snapped out of her anger induced state to see a ticker carapace of mana protecting the proud magus as the blonde smiled with clear satisfaction.

"Nice. Keep going like that!" Luvia almost purred her words. "Push more like that so I can see the limits of my spell, so I can perfect my gems!" Mana exploded around her as the energy finally took a more solid form. "Time for a stress test! Ready, Xuelan-san?!"

It was then the Rook of Phenex realized a truth pretty much universal about those who held

the title of 'magus'. "She is completely insane." Still fire empowered her fists and the area facilitated her magic.

A good thing too because otherwise the fight would be a slaughter.

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Akeno relaxed with a cup of chamomile tea while she sat at the peak of the highest mountain the architects of the Rating Game had made. The view wasn't exactly nice nor was the highest one she ever had. Fire was everywhere and since she was a child the woman could fly far higher than that.

"Hmm~ what a nice breeze." Yet the place was surprisingly pleasant and quiet, the ideal spot to sit down and take a cup of tea so long one didn't fear heights.

More interesting was that despite most of the dimension being covered in flames, that spot was just right to get a few gusts of wind. It helped that the closest source of heat was a small lava pool several meters below the peak.

Another good thing about the location was that she got to watch all the battlefield and thanks to her senses she knew exactly who was where. "Oh my, looks like Luvia-chan also found someone else. Makes me regret having to wait here." Her smile would say otherwise, a more pleasant visage than the view she had and one which made several in the audience melt already. "Ise-kun is having some trouble but if things get too hairy- Ah, Koneko-chan is lifting a mountain over her head... talk about overkill, fufufufu."

Much to her surprise Akeno found herself having fun watching the fights from her elevated position. While she wanted to participate and even help in one or two of those she did agree to wait for her fellow Queen for thirty minutes.

A snap of her fingers manifested a magic circle close to her head that looked like a clock. "She still has twelve minutes..." Pondered Medusa's High Priestess as she looked for Yubelluna in the battlefield. "Maybe Ravel is holding her back or waiting to see some of the results from the fights."

Pondering a little more of the subject, the Queen of Gremory would admit she didn't have the slightest clue of what the Sole Daughter of Phenex was thinking. Rias' plan was working for the most part so she could believe the Gremory King had figured something out that she didn't in the best cases regardless.

Either way Akeno was going to wait the remaining eleven minutes before heading out, giving Yubelluna a chance to either convince her King or just drop everything for the sake of their rematch.

'Hmm~ where should I go if she doesn't show up? Rias did say that we need to flush Ravel out but the priority was to take out the rest of the peerage first and foremost if we can help it.' Akeno couldn't help but giggle. 'She just wants to have-'

Akeno was consumed by an explosion.

Obviously it wasn't a natural event but a sort of attack, one unleashed by the Queen of Phenex who descended from even further in the skies towards the peak of the mountain, a passive aggressive expression in her face.

Yubelluna had hid her presence as best as she could before approaching the location, all in preparation for a surprise attack. Once in range the woman didn't waste a second, swinging her staff with all power she could accumulate in an instant with hopes of catching Akeno off guard.

It somewhat succeeded as the Bomb Queen was extremely skilled when it came to create fast blasts capable of taking down a bank's safe without much effort and keeping herself hidden was just an extra step.

An extra step that delayed her attack for a few extra milliseconds but wouldn't be a trouble so long she wasn't detected. Yubelluna wasn't detected, far from the Gremory Queen senses and above her sight. The first was only possible because of several fights happening all over the battlefield and her more than decent control born of her past as a magician.

Yes, the maneuver was somewhat successful because she managed to attack fast and hard without getting caught. It still failed in its main objective since the second the explosion happened Yubelluna was already turning her head to follow the ravenhead Queen as she reached her height.

Holding a broken cup, Akeno couldn't help but let out a sigh. "You made me spill the tea. That is too bad." Violet mischievous eyes watched the older woman. "I would have shared, if you wanted."

"And I would suspect it was poisoned." Yubelluna retorted while turning towards her opponent and expanding her aura. Stealth time was over, the real fight could begin promptly.

Something Akeno agreed with since she also expanded her own aura, lightning sparking around her. "Oh my~ I would never do such a thing."

"Why? Too proud?" Yubelluna asked with a confident smirk.

"No. It would be a waste of a good tea." Replied the priestess with an honest smile as she summoned a magic circle and deposited the cup's remains. "Seriously, did you need to attack like that? Are you that afraid of dear old me?"

"Feh. Fear? No, I knew from the beginning you would dodge." Yubelluna's dark purple aura grew even more intense as she grabbed her scepter with both hands and aimed it towards Akeno. "That was just a 'hello' to mark the occasion."

"Fufufufu. Good." Lightning danced around Akeno's fingers as her power rose to match her opponent's. "Otherwise it wouldn't be fun! **Lightning Spear!**"

On top of Yubelluna's weapon a sphere with a magic circle in its center formed. "**Great Bomb!**"

The explosion was heard and seen throughout the whole battlefield as Queen's match began anew.

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