

Brothers In Arms

Von Khaosprinz

Chapter 2

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

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

"Atsuma?"

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

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

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

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

"Okay, fine then. Nero?"

"Hm? What?"

Mentioned part-devil was forcibly ripped out of his stunned daze when Dante appeared right in front of him. Worry was etched tightly onto his face, but there was

also a strange gleam in his eyes. Looking around, he noticed Tōya was regarding Atsuma with the same expression. Nero shifted awkwardly, his eyes still locked onto Atsuma.

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

For a brief moment, Nero wanted to snark at Dante for acting like his patron, but before he could open his mouth, something strange surged within him. Even though he wasn't sure what exactly it was, he spontaneously decided to put his faith into it and go along. So, he nodded.

"Okay."

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

"Atsuma? Or do you not want to?"

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

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

The dark-haired male nodded, smiling.

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

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

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

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

Nero was or this strange situation was getting to him a lot more, judging the way he was constantly flexing his fingers and fumbling with the hem of his shirt.

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

Atsuma sounded hesitant, but he threw a nervous smile over his shoulder and stopped his stride. Nero nodded, feeling awkward again. He sort of wanted to ask some questions as well, which made him feel even more awkward. This was not a situation he had ever thought to find himself in. How the fuck was he supposed to react?

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

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

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

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

Nero only nodded. "I'm Nero."

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

"So... what about your arm?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So, you wanna start?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And your parents?"

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

"Oh, I'm sorry."

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

"Hmmm..."

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

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

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

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

"Huh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

us, so we just decided to not dig any deeper than absolutely necessary."

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

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

For a brief moment, Nero dreaded to end up the awkward mess he usually did when talking about such topics, but to his immense surprise, he just found himself nodding his thanks. And to his even bigger surprise, he was *smiling*. Apparently there was something about this Atsuma that made him unexpectedly comfortable to be around.

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

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

"You want me to tell you about mine?"

"Yeah, actually."

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

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

because upon her revival, the *Queen of Ice* encased the entire town in ice and its residents... I felt so bad about it, I just *had* to do something.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

on a regular base just because Trish decided to drop by.

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

"Why do you hide your arm?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Anyways. I can promise he didn't do it because he had something against you but

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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