

Brothers In Arms

Von Khaosprinz

Chapter 3

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

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

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

"Fuck you."

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

"Seriously though. You okay?"

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

"So, what about those demons?"

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

"Actually, we decided to go pick you guys up and go take care of them now. Those things do sound like demons alright, but they appear to be a special breed. They're a

pretty curious bunch, actually. Those golems you can see around town? They apparently look like them-

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

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

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

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

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

Sooner rather than later, though, the four found themselves at the border of the city. Passing the guards, Tōya declared that the demons' hideout was about thirty minutes by foot from there and they started their trek through the peaceful environment.

Nero could feel even Dante being somewhat appreciative of the sheer nature surrounding this obviously advanced town. It was a long shot from where Dante had been living for most of his life, which was speckled with asphalt street and concrete buildings as far as eyes reach. Nero himself was a lot more used to this, having been born and raised in the much more rural town of *Fortuna*. But the forest surrounding his own hometown was a lot... wilder. Aggressive, even. Entirely unlike the idyllic picture of green grass adorned by trees, bushes and the occasional summer flower sprouting from the ground, interrupted only by a stream flowing in gentle waves and the paved path leading to other cities.

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

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

"Their hideout is at the foot of the mountains over there- but some strays might be closer. Atsuma and I took care of some daring to venture too close to the city just yesterday so they won't be too far out now, but better safe than sorry."

Nero shook his head as he was glancing at his silent and definitely not glowing *Devil Bringer*.

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, you could say that..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mind filling me in later?"

"Yeah, sure."

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

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

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

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

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

Tōya, who was eyeing them mildly interested, gave a curt nod. "Almost all golems have elemental properties. I assume you aren't prepared for that, but Atsuma and I

cover fire and water. These creatures lack the very telling core material these golems normally have, but their colour-scheme usually makes it rather obvious as well."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fangs as its belly. But alas, Lady Luck didn't favour him this time and Nero growled in displeasure. This was going to be a bitch.

Momentarily contemplating whether he should just stall for time and wait until one of the others could provide some backup, he idly hacked some small girls carrying flowers with very sharp looking edges around to pieces. Looking at them and then this other beast, the entire situation he found himself in started feeling more and more absurd by the minute. Where the hell did these things even *come* from? Thankfully, the snail-snake didn't seem to be very mobile so Nero could almost safely take care of the other creatures nearby while evading the teeth that were trying to rip his entire arm off. However, a shadow was suddenly cast over him, causing him to look up. Four or five griffon-like beasts were descending onto him, talons and claws bared to tear him a new one. Quickly rolling to the side, he grabbed a long, thin sword a female looking knight had dropped upon its death and hurled it at his attackers. It pierced through the first one, the force behind the throw strong enough to slam it into the two behind, causing them all to tumble down onto the ground in a rain of blood.

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

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

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

Tearing himself away from the unreal scenario unravelling in front of him (*Does it look like this when Dante and I are at work, too? Man, no wonder people are scared of us...*), Nero returned both his attention and the blade of his sword to the remaining demons around him. Stabbing one of them through the chest before revving up his *Red Queen*, causing the shrieking beast to burst into flames, he lifted it into the air and threw it into a group of other creatures that were slowly approaching him. The snake-snail-thing was beginning to calm down again, although its violent twitching and piercing shrieks suggested it was still in a lot of pain- understandably. It turned its remaining

heads into his direction and levelled a burning gaze at Nero that promised a very slow and equally agonising death, foamy saliva dripping out of its mouths in long, thick strings. He watched as it started in his direction, faster than before. Funny what anger could do to someone- or something.

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

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

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

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

With a mighty swing downward and a shout, he landed on the ground hard, his sword cutting through three necks at once. The moment the creature started wailing and

thrashing, black blood spilt out of the severed and burnt stumps, slicking the ground. Nero jumped back again to avoid being hit by it, but Atsuma was there in an instant. His fists were already surrounded by intricate patterns similar to the ones Tōya had drawn into the air at the beginning of their battle, but this time, they were red and orange instead of white and blue. His older friend landed a barrage of heavy punches on the demon's soft belly, flames bursting forth every time they connected and the creature's screeches were getting weaker, its movements slower. Fuelled by the prospect of this fight being over soon, Nero raised his *Devil Bringer* for one final attack. Propelling himself forward, he drew his scaled arm back, its spectral version appearing above. It met its goal with a crunch that was both satisfying and disgusting at the same time, but the beast let out one last, deafeningly high-pitched shriek and then started to melt, leaving only greenish-black goo in its wake. Nero took a quick step back, banishing his spectral arm with a thought, and wrinkled his nose.

"This is just *so gross*."

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

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

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

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!"