

In concept, Lelouch had been in a room with those who shaped the world before. The leaders of factions that spanned the globe. Meetings of the United Federation of Nations, that he had co-opted for his own purposes. Those leaders who spoke, and the world moved at their behest. Yet. That was different to this. In those times, it was a matter of factions of men. Factions built with words. Leaders that spoke, and the world moved at their behest, but only because their followers listened. Great hierarchies, for which those leaders commanded like puppeteers for continent-spanning marionettes. Like chess players for the grandest game imaginable.

Here? The people in this room with him? They were not the same. These were not leaders commanding through words. These were leaders who commanded through power. Raw power to shape existence with their own hands. Not the power to command, though by nature of having raw power, they had legions to command as well. No. The five people in this room could shatter the city by flexing too hard. Even among those with powers beyond most mortal understanding, they stood above. Only literal gods stood higher and even then, only some of them.

And the goal was peace between these natural enemies. The only thing truly unifying them, a vague, unknown threat that had connections with all three of their factions. The angels knew. The devils knew. The fallen knew. They had all seen something bubbling under the seeming cold war. A heat slowly but surely rising to a boil, with some unknown figures adding more and more fuel. It was an ironic state of affairs and a difficult needle to thread, however. For those who sought peace and those who hoped to destroy everyone involved. The mere existence of these forces seeking to undermine the three factions was also what brought the angels and devils to the table.

As was so often the case, peace might be achieved in preparation for an even greater war.

The meeting room within the central spire of the Triskelion Towers was a few people shy of being crowded. Within were of course Michael and Gabriel representing Heaven, Azazel representing the Grigori, and Sirzechs and Serafall representing the devils. As witnesses and hosts, Lelouch, Rias and Sona alongside their Queens were in attendance. Strictly speaking, they weren't representing devils despite being devils themselves. As those who were victims of the attack that provoked these talks, their opinion on the preferred outcome would hold weight. As would the opinion of the priest and church exorcist who had likewise been dragged into the incident through duplicity within their own faction. None were truly blameless, and therein lay some common ground.

Finally, the closest thing to a neutral party, or even a human party, resided in Arthur Pendragon. Another who was not innocent or blameless. No, in truth he carried more blame than most and would say as much if asked. However, he alongside his loyal second, Bedivere, deliberately refused to truly tie themselves to any one faction. They, by their own words, represented the preservation and protection of humanity. Some might have called such a position grotesque given what they had become most known for. Yet they were hardly the most hypocritical people in that room. Every one of the faction leaders present would hear of one hundred and eighty two

unmade souls and call those rookie numbers. The only thing differentiating them would be that the angels would be genuinely regretful about it.

Below the meeting room, several members of the mixed peerages monitored the security situation. The points of interest. The infrastructure that had been built up in preparation for these talks. Others, the less capable or less comfortable with the pressure, were kept in the upper floors of the central tower. The three outer towers had been fully evacuated and locked down. During the negotiations, no one would be getting in or out without the hosts' say so.

"Lord Lucifer, if we are to make any progress at all, we must settle the disputes that have incited aggression every single time."

"In principle I agree. Which is why over the centuries we've been doing exactly that," Sirzechs answered Michael's continued insistence. "Preying on the humans. We no longer deal in souls, we no longer prey on those who don't come to us first. These were concessions made as a means to keep the peace between our factions and they were not popular within devil society. However, they were seen as, if you'll pardon my phrasing, a necessary evil. Peace, temporary as it was expected to be, was considered worth giving up what many of our people considered to be our culture, our natural instinct. They have been written into law. What more can you expect from us as a show of good faith, when those attempting to stir dissent use those very laws as a means to foment rebellion?"

The discussion had been much more frank and honest than Lelouch expected. The troubles of each faction weren't exactly a secret, but it was surprising to hear Sirzechs speak so candidly with those who should be enemies by the usual logic. Hiding or downplaying one's own weaknesses was the basics of the basics in a negotiation. Being so open about them showed that, while they were negotiating exact terms, the devil leadership were on board with the idea of a lasting peace. The New Satans at least. It was both a good and bad thing that the one representing the Great King was not present. Were Zekram here, he would have made the process excruciatingly difficult. On the other hand, his absence allowed him to play up the downsides of any agreement the New Satans made, at no consequence to himself. No, instead he would gain while risking nothing. The epitome of a savvy politician with no guiding ethos of his own.

But, with a lack of risk, came a lack of control. The Satans were performing a balancing act. While they had no need to worry over what the fallen wanted, they had to appease the angels, yet at the same time had to consider the preferences of the moderates and the quiet hardliner support for the Old Satans. Too few concessions would hamper the negotiations, too many would anger the devils back home. To Lelouch, angering the latter was less of a concern, so long as Zekram wouldn't profit from it. And who could prevent Zekram from profiting from it?

Someone ready and willing to take advantage of circumstance-borne opportunity, and positioning achieved so long ago. Perhaps working for the fossil wouldn't be quite the waste as

Lelouch had initially believed. Zekram had ceded control. Who better to take it in his place than his heir?

"But your people ignore the law," Gabriel countered Sirzechs' point with concern. Like she was disappointed he didn't understand that when he so obviously did. "There are so many good people who are taken in by devils under false pretences! Little Asia Argento was such a good girl and only wanted to help people, only to be deceived by a devil! What about those devils, who trick, who deceive, who steal Father's gift to the humans?!"

"Respectfully, Lady Gabriel, that is a terrible example!" Rias interjected hotly before anyone could stop her. She shook off Sona's warning hand. "Yes, I'm aware it's not my place to speak Sona, but I won't have someone weaponise a member of my peerage like that with such a mangling of events! Yes, she healed a devil, but it was the church who immediately excommunicated her for her show of mercy and unconditional kindness! The church, who left her lost and alone, vulnerable to the predations of the fallen and that disgusting stray exorcist! Punished by your followers for 'only wanting to help people'!"

Lelouch's hand found her arm next. Not to stop her for propriety's sake, but to tell her with his eyes that she had made her point. Meanwhile Azazel did his best to pretend he wasn't currently in the room, drawing as little attention to himself as possible.

With a genuine expression of regret, the archangel apologised. "I'm sorry. You're right. We all have much to atone for and to make right. We angels are without sin, but the church who follow the teachings of our Father are not. We will do what we can to make things better, but for that reason, can we not ask the same of the devils?"

Sirzechs offered his sister the slightest grateful nod for undermining those across the table. "We are not the same, Lady Gabriel. Much like your church, our laws are only laws. Unlike angels, devils don't suddenly go through drastic physiological changes when those laws are broken. Like the humans, those who act against the law must be discovered before they can then be punished for their transgressions. We do what we can. If you wish, we can arrange for you to discuss our current methodology with Falbium to see if it can be improved in non-invasive ways. But as for those who would take Sacred Gear bearers into their peerage... I'm not sure what you expect us to do about that."

"Stop it!" Gabriel answered while Michael grimaced, understanding just why it was not so simple.

"If I may?" Sirzechs said as he gestured and looked at the Queens standing behind Lelouch and Sona. Both nodded. "Kallen Stadtfeld, reincarnated as a devil in her dying moments. Entirely consensual, saving her life alongside what was left of her company. Do you regret it?"

"Not on your life," the redhead answered immediately. "Or mine, I s'pose," she added with a smirk.

Sirzechs nodded. "Tsubaki Shinra, reincarnated as a devil as part of a contract to gain control of her natural trait. It wasn't even known she had a Sacred Gear until after she was reincarnated. Understanding this, Miss Shinra, do you regret it?"

"Not at all."

Once again, the Lucifer nodded and turned his attention back to the angels. "It's in the nature of devils to bargain for power. It's what we do. I myself command one of the greatest samurai to ever live, as well as a giant from among the Norse faction. Of course we would seek out those with Sacred Gears. If they didn't exist, we would still be seeking out the creatures that inhabit them." He took a breath, held a hand slightly higher to indicate he wasn't done, just taking a moment to collect his thoughts and arrange his argument. "But they do exist," he continued. "Your Father created a system to give power to humanity, but that system was designed with the belief that it would always function appropriate to its purpose. For that, it needed its designer present, ensuring it would continue to do so. Am I wrong?"

Michael grimaced. "No. No, that is tragically accurate."

Sirzechs nodded, showing a certain extent of sympathy. They were both leaders with their own particular struggles. One who didn't feel he was up to the task, and in truth wasn't up to the task. While the other had to oversee a people who wanted to tear him down. Different, certainly. But each aware of the troubles of leadership. "If He were still here, the first reincarnated devil with a Sacred Gear would have been obliterated and taken their King with them, or something along those lines. There would never have been a half-devil born with a Sacred Gear. It would have been unacceptable and preventable. But that isn't the case. It might not have been His intention, but He has given power to humanity and left them to do with it as they will without any protection. If not us, any other faction would seek Sacred Gear bearers. Did we not discuss the church taking them in only moments ago?"

Just like Sirzechs had moments before, it was Michael's turn to collect his thoughts and formulate a response. "While we wish it weren't so, the members of the church often do not hold as true to Father's teachings as we wish they would, nor do they represent the will of Heaven. They have long acted without the supervision of my brothers and sisters, deliberately so. Humans are Father's favoured children. Free will was his first gift to them. The power to enact it in the form of Sacred Gears was his last gift to them."

"Little bit of revisionist history there," Serafall muttered under her breath. "Father Hyoudou," she said sweetly, turning to look at the priest sat next to the exorcist, "What was the name of your church denomination again?"

"The Church of Saint Gabriel!" he answered proudly and without hesitation.

Despite how her favourite servant was unknowingly undermining Michael's argument, Gabriel smiled at him. "As is his choice," she said, turning that smile toward Serafall. "They have the freedom to act as they will. They may serve and serve piously, or they may serve in ways we would not condone. Or they may not serve at all. Or, they may seek the aid of devils and turn away from His love."

"They have choice in all ways," Michael agreed with an appreciative look at the archangel he chose to accompany him. "Even in ways that Father would not approve of. That is their freedom."

Sirzechs stared at him for a long few seconds. "It sounds like you answered the issue of the Sacred Gears yourself then."

Michael opened his mouth, closed it, then wore an embarrassed and resigned expression. "It seems we have. I might wish it were not so. Father would not approve. Yet, it was his will that rendered unto humans both gifts, and the first deems the second as theirs to do with as they wish. To use them for good or ill, to covet, discard or give away, no matter whose hands they may fall into. However." By his look, the moment of concession was over, as his hands lay flat on the table, as he stared at his equal and opposite. "If that is the case. We will protect them from those who would prey upon their ignorance. If devils operate by contracts, they will operate by contracts. With full understanding and consent of both parties. We will not stand for the abuse of Father's favoured children."

Witnessing the byplay, it remained astonishing just how... Good, the angels were. Of course they were. They were angels. It was in their nature to be good by most understandings of the word, and deviance from that state would render them no longer angels, as Sirzechs had said. But it was one thing to understand they would not sin by very defined terms, and quite another to recognise that they would willingly concede with no reason to beyond... Someone made a good point.

An utterly alien mindset. Not just from devils, but from a vast majority of humans as well. Even if a person did agree, they may have still argued based on mood, or pride, or to refuse losing an advantage, or to save it as a point to concede later in exchange for a victory on something else. There were so many reasons. Michael and Gabriel refused them all. Were they just bad at this? No... No, they weren't. Lelouch could see the difference in mindset. Michael had shown it there too. They didn't mind conceding a well-made point, because if there wasn't a well-made point, if there wasn't a good argument, they would not concede at all. No give and take. The archangels weren't here to discuss terms as much as they wanted to see what peace would look like.

And if they didn't like it, they would walk away.

And so it came as little surprise that Serafall answered, "We can commit to that objective, with the understanding you will do the same. And you Azazel, we can all still see you, you were the one who pushed for this, grow a spine."

"No, you're right, you're right!" the Governor General of the Grigori answered with waving hands. "Remember that was the point of what I was trying to do. Silence the hardliners so they'd stop trying to stir up trouble. It didn't work," he admitted with a grimace, "But that doesn't mean I intend to stop trying. I want peace. Just as I said."

As suspicious as she had been of him before, Serafall nodded in acknowledgement. "Likewise for your church," she added for the angels. "Everything they do is in your name or His name. Time to own up to that. They're the cause of half of his problems," she said with a nod at Azazel.

"You want us to be more direct with the faithful?" Michael asked, somewhat taken aback by the strange demand.

Michael smirked. "I'm fairly sure we can sell it back home if it means less exorcists indiscriminately hunting devils. After all, we're negotiating peace. Of course, fewer atrocities against humans in the name of slaughtering devils feels like something we should easily agree on. I would say we would take issue with angels descending to deliver sermons to every church in the world. But those who fully dedicate themselves to serving Heaven should understand what Heaven would want from them. And more importantly, what you wouldn't want from them."

"Then... In principle, we agree," Michael answered with a smile that literally lit the room. "We will need to agree more detailed terms, of course. And yes, this will require collaboration on both sides so we would very much like to discuss your methods for finding lawbreakers with Lord Asmodeus."

"Isn't this wonderful, Ise?!" gushed Gabriel, beaming at her favourite servant, arms pressing her breasts together above her clasped hands. "This means we'll be able to spend more time together!"

"Hooray!" the questionable priest cheered.

"Hooray..." the far less enthusiastic exorcist echoed, trying her best not to shoot sour looks at the buxom archangel.

"While the mood is so high, I'm afraid I must take the opportunity to broach a difficult subject." And with only those words from Michael, the mood dropped significantly. "If there is to be peace... I believe it important to settle past grievances. Some wounds from the war still bleed freely, and I would appreciate your cooperation in seeing one mended. You have one of our own in captivity. I request that the Dominion Sabriel be released, and returned home." And with the name, it fell yet further as both Satans wore grimaces. "I know she still lives, despite not returning from battle. If there is to be peace, there should be no prisoners of war."

The Satans exchanged a look. "That, I'm afraid that is a difficult request."

Difficult was vastly understating it. Lelouch understood this well. After all, it would mean directly confronting Zekram over these negotiations. The very one who would seek to capitalise on whatever concessions were given as part of them. And to force him to give up something like this? Him directly? Him personally? Something so dear to his hateful, spiteful heart?

Lelouch knew who Sabriel was. With his deal with Zekram done, with his mother restored, preparations were made. The most basic preparations. Learning more about the man from those who unfortunately knew him best. Lelouch's father Herodotus not only knew Zekram that well, he had been alive when the incident with Sabriel occurred. It was the incident that made him the head of the House of Bael. And of course, that meant he was a witness to what was done. A witness to the fate of his father Yveneas' killer. One of many, many reasons Herodotus was terrified of crossing Zekram.

Truthfully, Lelouch didn't get many useful insights into Zekram's character beyond what he had already figured out for himself or what Ana had been willing to divulge. But this one foul bit of family history had turned out to be rather useful after all.

And now the question was, what to do with it. It was a valuable card to play. A difficult moment in the negotiations could be resolved right here and right now, by him. One failing, one chink in Zekram's political armour had been left open. Zekram Bael had given every indication to the Great King faction, to devil society as a whole, that on a certain level, Lelouch Bael could speak for him. He had never corrected that notion. It remained, not just by negligence but by necessity. After all, their agreement was still in place, wasn't it? The new agreement. Lelouch would marry the sisters of the Satans with Zekram's full blessing. How could he do that if Zekram was suddenly distancing himself from his descendent? And here Lelouch was, sitting at the negotiating table, in his own home even, as part of peace talks between the three factions. A representative, the representative, of the Great King.

When he was searching for an opportunity to undermine Zekram as part of these negotiations, how in the world could he ever pass up an opportunity like this one?