It was oddly cold for July.

Once the talks adjourned for the day, no time was wasted dragging Lelouch away, or rather ‘inviting’ him away, for a private discussion with the attending Satans. Sirzechs appeared contemplative, while Serafall carried herself with typical good-natured cheer while at the same time exuding a pressure that would send most low-class devils to their knees.

Yet. Lelouch remained proud and even a touch smug even as his extremities turned numb from the cold.

“Lelouch...” He didn’t know how to feel, hearing his name spoken so sweetly yet with such malevolence hidden within it. It was fairly typical for Serafall to call him that way by now, and oddly exciting. Unfortunately, it was usually because he was set to marry, and was currently fucking, her little sister. While in this instance he had legitimately pissed her off. In which case it was wholly inappropriate to get a little excited by a beautiful and menacing woman with a real axe to grind. “Please tell me what you were thinking in there. Or at least that you were thinking *at all.* And remember!” So sweet, so syrupy. Even chirpy like the high school age girl she pretended to be. “I’ve been waiting for you to give me a reason!”

As the chill travelled up his arms and legs— Oh. Not a chill at all. He was slowly being encased in ice. But as that happened, he couldn’t help but wonder if Sona would consent to a threesome. Perhaps he was feeling a little high on life at that moment, but from his perspective, he had good reason to be.

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Over an hour ago

“... We...” Sirzechs looked at Serafall, the two attempting to come to any kind of diplomatic way of responding to Michael’s request. “That is, the principle of your request is sound.”

“We would do whatever is reasonable and within our means to reach an agreement here,” Serafall agreed. Leaving just what they actually thought of the request right there as implication. Sabriel, a Dominion, an eight-winged angel sent into the war toward its closing days. A prisoner of war, and if the war was ending in all ways with these peace talks, it was more than reasonable in concept for her to be returned. However, achieving that outcome would be worse than challenging. It would be a near impossibility without negotiating with Zekram directly. For something he would rather rip off a limb than agree to.

What the two Satans were struggling with, was how to convey that to the angels. To feel out exactly where that would put these talks if such a thing would not be possible. To determine which terrible option was preferable; these talks failing entirely, or capitulating to whatever Zekram Bael would demand in return for saving them.

The ancient, bitter bastard might not even feel happy about such a windfall of power and leverage. If there was one aspect of his existence that Zekram valued over his prideful megalomania, it was his centuries old grudge against the one who took his perfect heir.

Azazel was beginning to look uneasy as the first major stumbling block arrived. The angels... Seemed less disquieted by the carefully worded response that wasn't an agreement, nor was it a refusal. Lelouch had expected this to be an issue that would cause fury for the mere thought of the devils refusing. Yet... Hm... Did they know a little more than they were letting on?

"The downfall of Sabriel was... Her final act dealt particular injury to a very significant figure." Sirzechs continued to avoid outright saying no. Continued to dance around why he desperately hoped he could still say no. "Were she in the custody of the devil government as a whole, I would already be arranging her release. However, she is not. Her release isn't something I can unilaterally offer."

Minimal reaction from Michael. Either he didn't care in the slightest about Sirzechs' verbal dance, or he knew all that already. It was more than possible. The details of the war were not secret. Witnesses to what happened likely survived. A significantly powerful angel took out one of the most accomplished generals among the devils, and soon after, disappeared. War was war, but for her to disappear and be known to survive all these centuries, it was fair to assume someone wanted vengeance they could savour.

On the other hand, it remained that the angels didn't care about waffling or equivocating. So the non-reaction may have been a result of that. There was no way to know without letting the Satans bury the subject for the time being. Lelouch could tell that was the direction this was going. They would table the matter, take time to figure out options for how to resolve it.

"Of course not."

"Lelouch!" Sona hissed. Oh, she knew him too well. She knew he was up to something the instant he opened his mouth.

Oh, he loved her for that. It wouldn't stop him, but he loved her for it. "As Lord Lucifer previously mentioned. The Satans do not hold unquestioned authority in the underworld, nor should they. Such unchecked power nearly restarted the war, until Lord Lucifer and Lady Leviathan's predecessors were unseated for the vanity and greed that would have doomed our species." Serafall looked like she wanted to murder him. Sirzechs' eyes were wide and unblinking. They both at least had an idea why Lelouch chose to speak on this issue, and so he didn't leave them in suspense on where he was going. "The Lady Sabriel's status is a difficult issue that I'm afraid is beyond the Satans' direct control, but if this issue can be set aside for the moment, I would be glad to personally discuss it in private on the relevant party's behalf."

Michael examined the Bael heir as one fiancée looked ready to strangle him and the other sighed fondly with a helpless look on her face. “Lord Lucifer and Lady Leviathan don’t have the authority to do so, but you do.”

“I do. As you said, Michael, it is long past time we put an end to the grudges between us.”

“Maybe it’s time for a break!” Serafall suggested with a brittle smile. “Take some time to make sure we’re all on the same page!”

“Does Lelouch Bael not have the authority he claims to have?” Michael asked.

“I-eh-ah, w-well—!”

“He does,” Sirzechs confirmed. “In this specific matter, more than we do.”

“Then we will be more than happy to let the matter rest during these talks, to be ironed out in private.” He favoured the Bael heir with a grateful smile, then ceded the floor for Azazel to speak on his particular concerns and conditions.

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“Was anything I said incorrect?” Lelouch asked the Satans now that they were in private. “You know as well as I do where exactly that conversation would have led. Was negotiating with Zekram Bael directly truly how you wanted this to progress?”

“If that was what it would take,” Sirzechs answered. “You’re forgetting how the civil war was won, Lelouch. We’ve come to terms with Zekram before, we can do it again.”

“You can say that so confidently now, but that was not what I was seeing in the meeting room. You know the differences between that and this almost as clearly as I do.”

“*Almost* as clearly?” Serafall echoed. “Sirzechs, stop playing into his arrogance.”

“Serafall—”

“No! Enough!” she insisted, turning to face her fellow Satan. “Every time I’ve had to deal with him, it was because he decided to do something ridiculous that spits on our authority! He’s twenty years old!”

“How old were we *then*, Serafall?” Sirzechs asked.

“How old are you *now?*” Lelouch added, reminding them he was still right there in front of them and by no means a bystander in this matter. “Yes. I’m twenty. You two were less than a hundred during the civil war, the first time you negotiated with Zekram, and you’re only in your seventh

century now. If you want to play the age card we all fail before we begin when it comes to the oldest living devil. And yes, you *almost* understand the difference," he continued, getting back to his actual point. "Sabriel was the angel who killed not only the head of Bael at the time, but the one Zekram intended to be his true heir in all ways, intended to take the reins of the Great King faction from him. There might just have been only one thing Zekram Bael loved more than power, and it was Yveneas Bael. You want to talk about age? The grudge he holds against Sabriel is older than *all of us*."

Sirzechs grimaced at the assessment. One he hadn't heard put in such explicit terms before. Not the matter of age, but just how strongly Zekram felt about the matter. "If nothing else, Serafall. Lelouch knows his own family in ways we don't." What had been vague trust that Lelouch knew what he was doing, and the situation could be corrected if he was wrong, had become understanding that yes. The Bael heir understood more than they did on this matter. "Hypothetically—"

"Sirzechs~!" Serafall complained, less angrily and more a sound of resigned petulance. Even the freezing air over Lelouch's skin had been reduced to a deeply unpleasant chill.

"Hypothetically," Sirzechs repeated. Internal devil affairs was his territory. "Were we to attempt to come to terms with Zekram, what would it cost us?"

It was a question Lelouch had to take a moment to ponder. Because the answer was not obvious in the slightest. What Zekram wanted was power, but as the heir had described to the Satans, so far as he could tell he wanted to torment Sabriel and that was an activity he stood to lose. A devil like him could always gather power again, but she was finite. "I'm not certain you could." Though that was an unsatisfying answer for all of them. "This is too important to him, and something he stands to truly lose. I'm not sure there's anything you could give him that—"

And then it hit him.

"I believe I know what he would do," the Bael heir continued in a dead, bitter tone, coloured by the ashes of equally bitter memories on his tongue. "He would give you terms that would sicken you, but you would swallow anyway. He would fulfil his obligations to the letter. And as punishment for even thinking you could take such a thing away from him, and as punishment for Sabriel in an entirely different way, he would make sure she continued to suffer even in the angels' care, and that there would be nothing we could do about it. He would turn her into a poison pill." It wouldn't stop there either. He would then turn that example of devilish trickery to gather more power, court the Old Satan faction even harder, remind the moderates of the Great King exactly who had been in power for millennia. All by humiliating the New Satans and deeply hurting the forces of Heaven.

"That's a very specific expectation," Sirzechs noted.

“Call it personal experience,” Lelouch responded, gathering his professionalism and gravitas again. “Blame my youth if this sounds like I’m taking those times lightly, but you’re lucky you and he were mostly on the same page during the civil war. If you weren’t, he would have made you suffer for asking for his help.”

Serafall folded her arms and pursed her lips. “Assuming your impression of him is right, that only makes the idea of giving Sabriel back to Heaven look even more dangerous. No matter *who* negotiates with Zekram.”

“Exactly,” Lelouch agreed with a smile, a smirk, and a sinister glint in his eye. “That’s why I have no intention of negotiating with Zekram.” Neither Satan seemed sure what he was getting at. But, as the devil, the demon, and the man he had always been, he had no qualms of spelling it out for them. “It was said in the meeting, wasn’t it? Why would I negotiate with Zekram when I can negotiate on his behalf?”

What had been expressions of patient or mildly irritated contemplation, suddenly warped on Serafall and Sirzechs’ faces. Shifted into incomprehension... And then disbelief. Serafall looked at Sirzechs, opened her mouth, then closed it. Sirzechs fared only slightly better. “Lelouch...” he managed to say even as he tried to turn his response and thoughts even slightly coherent. “That... What you’re proposing is so dangerous for you it’s hard to put into words. That’s saying nothing of the wider implications.”

“And yet, it’s the only way it can happen,” the Bael countered. “No matter how it came to be, I have Zekram’s support. His *explicit* support. I have been allowed to speak for him. I have his blessing to go forward with an inter-faction marriage I arranged myself. If this is necessary to accomplish a real peace agreement—”

“You’ve said yourself how spiteful he is!” Serafall interrupted. “This could spark another civil war!”

“... Potentially,” Lelouch allowed, no longer smiling to show he took that possible outcome seriously. “So could a peace agreement. The Old Satans still remain a threat. We have sympathisers in both our factions. One way or another, they will attempt to seize power again before too long. Our society is under threat from too many directions and so our first priority must be to reduce the number of threats.”

“And if Zekram Bael takes your actions badly enough that he decides to join the Old Satans?” Sirzechs asked.

“Then we ensure that by the end of this, even *they* won’t want him.”

“... Lelouch,” Serafall said, and unlike before and unlike most times she had spoken to him, there was no frustration or distaste in the saying of his name. Instead, she said it with concern.

“If you do this, you will turn Zekram Bael into your enemy. From your own words, he’ll never forgive you for it, and this whole situation comes from what he does to his enemies.”

“I’m aware of that,” he said. He really was. Would his family status protect him? Would his status as a promising heir protect him? At best, only to an extent. There was a further, more twisted possibility that it would form a dichotomy of love and hate. Hurting Zekram so deeply, using his own tools and machinations against him, the ancient bastard would likely be impressed by it. But even that would only make the animosity and reciprocity worse. “I’m not afraid for myself. But I do have reasons to be worried about the outcome of this.” It wouldn’t be the first time Zekram would use someone he loved as a weapon against him. So long as Zekram lived, it wouldn’t be the last. “I still believe this is the right thing to do. I just ask you help me protect what’s important to me.”

“Of course I’ll protect So-tan!”

Lelouch blinked, deliberately slowly. “Yes, I did mean her,” Lady Leviathan of the one track mind, “but I also meant other people important to me.”

“Right, right, of course.”

Sirzechs put a hand on Lelouch’s arm. “This is going to put you front and centre in devil politics. Not just Zekram, but others will begin taking you far more seriously, and preparations must be made for that. Do you really believe you’re ready to take on that responsibility?”

“So far as I’m concerned, I have to be. But yes, I am.”

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Another discussion in the meeting room. However, this one did not have anywhere near as many people attending. Only three. Michael, Sirzechs, and Lelouch.

“I was under the impression this would be between Lelouch and I alone,” said Michael.

“That was the intention,” Lelouch acknowledged. “However, for as much as this might have been handled outside the Satans, Lord Lucifer has agreed to take on some ownership of it to advise while moving forward. For my sake,” he added as clarification. Even if it was also to plan around everything decided here for the sake of devil society as a whole. “Michael, so we all understand one another on this matter, are you aware of Sabriel’s status at all? Beyond that she still lives, that is?”

The archangel’s shoulders slumping gave something of an answer. “Yes. I am aware she has already fallen. Nevertheless, I must see her freed. That is all that I ask for.”

“And I fully intend to honour that request,” Lelouch answered firmly. “However... Her capture was during the war, at its most vicious and retributive, and very deliberate. Saying that her treatment was unkind would be a monstrous understatement, but I would struggle to find words that describe it accurately. To achieve her release, I will need to have your cooperation in it. And for that, you need to know exactly what happened before you see her.”

And so, Lelouch outlined the history as much as he knew. His grandfather Yveneas Bael taking command and becoming highly successful. Heaven taking notice, enough that Sabriel was sent to eliminate him. The status of Yveneas as Zekram’s chosen heir, and the planned retribution that followed. The deliberate choice to enter battle solely to capture her, and then... The exotic and horrific torture he had designed for her. The hell beyond anyone’s comprehension created for Zekram Bael’s centuries long revenge.

Michael listened to the entirety. Understanding shifted into sadness, which then shifted into heartbreak. And then...

Lelouch had to imagine, so few people had seen an archangel cry, to say nothing of Michael himself. It was a beautiful and terrible sight, golden tears trickling down his face as his fists clenched on the table, his power fluctuating in jagged, roiling waves from his body. Fighting to let his divine wrath free, yet restraining it for the sake of peace. “I need a moment,” he said as he turned around, lay his hands on the wall of the meeting room as he tried to collect himself.

WHAM.

His fist slammed into the wall.

WHAM.

Again.

WHAM WHAM WHAM WHAM “Nggghhhahhhh!” A wail of despair. Impotent despair. A return to those days of the war, when the horror felt like it would never end. When angels, when the faithful, when any and all would suffer before their cruel fate would conclude. And one such instance had been ongoing for so long, with none knowing or able to do anything to stop it.

There were still so many devils who would give their lives to see Michael endure such crushing and overwhelming despair. Lelouch did not feel that way. He hoped to never see something like this again.

“Am I expected to *forgive* for this?!” Michael asked, his tears burned away by fury. “I can see no other reason you would tell me all of this now! You expect me to allow this thing to live!”

“... Yes.”

Angry pacing. Angry, horrified pacing, as everything the archangel was and represented demanded that his sword purge the evil he learned of from existence.

But that could not be how this ended. “If peace is the goal, difficult choices must be made,” Lelouch argued. “No matter how righteous it might be, no matter how much better off we would all be, Zekram Bael killed by an archangel, or *any* angel, would make him a martyr.”

“How dare you use that word!” Michael raged. “How dare you use *that* word to describe a creature like him!”

“There are still devils who want to go back to the old ways,” Sirzechs picked up. “If Heaven acts against the oldest living devil, takes his life, all of this, all of our efforts here will not only come to nothing, it will achieve the opposite. The power vacuum left by Zekram will be filled by the most vicious, most vengeful, most vile devils who will create a frenzy for more atrocities. The war will begin again and this time none of us will survive it.”

Michael’s shoulders shook as he planted his hands on the table. Tried to control himself. With a movement too fast for Lelouch to see, the archangel’s palms slammed down onto the table. The structure cracked, shattered and fell to pieces. Taking a deep breath as blood leaked from the corner of his mouth, he fixed the devils with a look. “Sabriel... Will be freed.” It wasn’t a question. It was a demand.

Lelouch nodded. “You have my word.”

Michael nodded tightly. The discussion from there was brief, clipped. Tentative arrangement for how this would occur, and that the details must not escape the meeting room.

And that was the end of the first day of negotiations. A part of Lelouch hoped someone would get around to attacking already. Assassination attempts had to be less taxing than this.