

Brothers In Arms

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Chapter 4

Atsuma's scandalised shout had also gained both Dante's and Tōya's attention. They'd teamed up to track down and kill the few demons that had gotten away from their half of the battlefield, but upon hearing their companion, their heads whipped around into the direction of his voice. Tōya did a double take upon seeing the gigantic beast- even from this distance of over 400 feet, it looked incredibly impressive. For the first time today, raw emotion- namely, surprise- showed on his face. Even Dante looked more than just a little impressed, his eyebrows raised so high they'd disappeared underneath his hair. It took a moment, but after a second or two, the veteran hunter tore his icy blue eyes away from the giant to make out both Atsuma and Nero in the distance, looking even filthier than he and his temporary partner did, but in pretty good health. He couldn't make out any details, of course, but their both stances looked normal. Well, aside from Atsuma's right hand that was pointing at the creature approaching the two young men.

Dante could suddenly hear a sharp *cling* when Tōya gripped his spear so tight his knuckles turned white, his eyes suddenly very hard and cold. He was grinding his teeth as he stared in the direction of their companions, leaving the demon hunter mildly curious. It took him less than a second to figure out that Tōya was insanely worried about the other two- well, maybe one moreso than the other, but still.

„Come on, we've got to help them.“

Without even waiting for an answer, the blue-clad student dashed off in the direction of their friends and the beast that was slowly getting close enough to start attacking the two young men. Giving himself another two seconds to observe, Dante nodded when they both fought off their petrification and dived into opposite directions to evade the huge jaw aiming for them. As soon as he saw the two getting back up off the floor, Dante, too, broke into a sprint, following Tōya to aid in taking this thing down. He trusted Nero to take care of himself, especially since he hadn't needed to trigger yet as well, and this Atsuma didn't strike him as a weakling or newbie, either, but he was not going to risk anyone getting hurt today.

And being eaten by that thing certainly qualified as 'getting hurt'.

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Unlike Atsuma, who only slowly regained his wits, Nero was already furiously thinking about a way to take this monster down somehow. Eyeing it warily as he zigzagged in a mad dash to left and right, one jaw after another snapping close in the spots he'd been a second ago, he couldn't really think of a lot they *could* do at this point.

Yes, they had managed to get through the smaller version of this thing to end its miserable existence, but with twice as many heads and a lot more reach, there just weren't any openings they could abuse to get close. They needed to create an opening themselves, but the way it looked now, that was going to be almost impossible- neither he nor Atsuma had the time to stay in one place for more than half a second. Not exactly the best prerequisites to try anything but keep running at this point.

Feeling his blood rising and a darker power pulsing inside of him, Nero decided to simply throw all caution into the wind and do what he could do in this situation. Which meant facing this beast down head-on. Grinding his teeth, he increased his speed and pulled out his trusty revolver. He doubted the shells would even do the tiniest bit of damage, but that wasn't what he was hoping for. He shot blindly into a cluster of multiple heads, assuming they'd hit their mark anyway. And besides- the more heads he got, the better. His plan's success became obvious when the frequency of the jaws closing in on him increased rapidly- he knew he was already *beyond* pushing it if the teeth grazing him, ripping his coat to shreds and even tearing his jeans in places and leaving red gashes behind in his flesh were any indication. Figuring seven heads right on his tail were enough if he didn't want to risk ending his life prematurely by even the tiniest mistake, Nero braced his leg against the ground mid-dash, turned around and used his momentum to launch himself into the direction he'd just come from- right into a few snake's heads with dozens of thin teeth almost as long as he was tall.

He crashed right into them, the impact causing his bones to rattle and less than a second later, a sharp pain shot through his leg, a distracted look revealing a razor-sharp tooth going straight through his thigh, almost taking it off entirely. Biting his lip, he summoned the power resting within and felt it surging forth, pulsating through his entire body before being unleashed in a powerful explosion of blue light.

Nero almost fell to his knees as his vision flashed white due to the burning in his leg and a pained scream tore out of his throat. It was drowned out by the agonising screeches the humongous demon was letting out of its remaining heads, however, so not even he could hear its echo. The shockwave had forcefully pushed the heads around him away- as he'd expected and counted on-, but that also meant the tooth lodged in his leg had been pushed out, tearing more flesh and bones apart that were now knitting themselves back together, the infernal pain subsiding and making place for a dull ache that would fade soon as well.

Forcing himself to open his red-glowing eyes, he pushed himself back into a standing position again, the material of his right pant leg hanging down in tatters, soaked in his own blood. He looked at the beast that was thrashing around, long necks twisting and turning as it continued to scream. His stunt had blown two heads clean off and fried another two, leaving them almost entirely harmless- well, not as much as he'd hoped for, but that was at least something. Maybe it would give him just a little more room

to breathe and try figuring something out.

Unlike its smaller counterpart, this giant recovered from this blow a lot faster. The decapitated and charred stumps were curled close to its body and oozing blood in thick drips onto the ground, but new ones were already searching for his presence again. It moved its huge body into his direction, deceptively quick despite its mass and raised almost half of its heads high into the air before arching over him- and a brown, mud-like substance swelled forth from its maws, aiming for an area of which he was the centre. In the same moment Nero kicked himself off the ground to get out of the danger zone, he inwardly cursed that he couldn't use his *Devil Bringer* in the same way he normally would. But utilising the spectral arm on something as big as this needed concentration and also a moment of stillness, and even though the scales had proven to be equally impenetrable as this creature's shell, that didn't account for all that much if it could just eat him along *with* his arm.

The muddy mass was descending onto him quickly, accelerated by the pressure of which the beast expelled it while simultaneously turning its heads to keep following him. Although he was pushing himself and his limits to go faster, it was coming ever the closer and just when he knew that he couldn't get away and was bracing himself for the impact and any possible results of coming in touch with this substance, did a white and blue pattern above him materialise, lines weaving intricate designs to form a cocoon around him. Slightly surprised, Nero kept moving, the glowing shell following him as the brown liquid harmlessly slid off, not a drop touching him directly. He wasn't quite sure what was happening next, but he could hear the sound of waves coming rapidly closer and mere seconds later, water was washing the mud away. He stopped, watching as a large wave, three times as tall as he was and just as wide cleared all the snake-snail-vomit away before forcefully crashing into its producer itself. The protective shield around him was fading as the young hunter saw the beast being pushed back by the pressure ever so slightly, jaws snapping at thin air but unable to reach him. He felt another person standing next to him and glanced to his right.

Tōya was standing there, looking decidedly more ragged than earlier today with sweat dripping down his temples. He was breathing heavily, his face both pale and red at the same time from exhaustion. He was gripping his spear tightly and spared Nero only a quick look along with a short nod and the customary *You okay? Good.* before his blue eyes focussed on another spot in the distance, slightly to the left of the giant beast. His mouth was pressed into a thin line as he watched grimly and Nero followed his trail of sight.

He was just in time to watch Atsuma fending off an attacking head with burning fists when another was closing in on him. Before it could get too close, however, *Rebellion* suddenly came flying from the side, going straight through its neck, the impact knocking it down and pinning it to the ground. Less than a second later, Dante leapt in and simply threw a surprised Atsuma over his shoulder before heading in their direction with a series of long jumps. As soon as they reached Tōya and him, Dante put the other man back onto the ground, who then proceeded to scratch the back of his head with a sheepish expression before offering his thanks for the save. Giving his older relative a brief look, he noted how beaten-up he, too, looked, although he'd

managed to stay unscathed as of yet. His attention was back on Atsuma again, however, when the red-clad student put his hands together and momentarily closed his eyes, followed by a small, white light surrounding him and finally settling in his chest. Nero watched with mild amazement as his scratches closed again, leaving unharmed, albeit scarred, flesh behind.

"Huh. That's useful", Dante voiced both their thoughts as Atsuma opened his eyes again and let out a small laugh.

"Haha, yeah. It takes a moment, though, so it's not really useful directly in battle. It's great to keep me going during short breathers like this, though. But Tōya, you look more than spent, you should fall back and-"

"Don't worry about me, Atsuma, I still have a trick or two up my sleeve."

Atsuma looked doubtful, but instead of voicing his disagreement, he shrugged his shoulders and brought his hands together once more. This time, it took a moment longer, but then his entire body started glowing along with some sparks. It disappeared after a moment, but when he opened his heterochromic eyes once more, they were flashing with an entirely new strength and fighting spirit. He slammed his right fist into the palm of his hand and offered them all a grin. As he was about to open his mouth, his gaze settled on Nero and instead of speaking, he let out a surprised noise.

"Whoa! What's *that*?"

Nero stared at his new friend blandly for a moment before he remembered that he had triggered earlier. Funny how this seemed to shock him while his own, wondrous abilities didn't. Instead of answering- not that he was entirely sure how to explain the spirit made out of blue light hovering behind him, but oh well- he decided to be the voice of reason for once.

"I'd say we save the chit-chat for *after* we've dealt with our big bud behind us."

Atsuma did another double-take upon hearing his echoing voice, but Nero paid that no mind. Instead, he awaited confirmation from the three of them, which Dante and Tōya immediately gave in form of a nod. A short moment later, the red-clad student agreed as well. All four of them turned to face the giant creature again that was straining against the water pushing it back. It had been trying to reach them, but the wave pressing against it proved to be powerful enough to lock them both into place. Nero assumed that was one of the reasons why Tōya was looking so spent- not that he knew all that much about this Enchantment-business, but from what little he'd seen and gathered, this must've taken a lot of effort.

The very moment the blue-clad student lifted the Enchantment, the water slowly disappearing, his shoulders sagged and he took multiple deep breaths, looking exhausted, but also a lot less tense. The same second that the huge demon was able to overpower the force of the water was also their starting signal, and all three of them rushed forward. Out of the corner of his eye, Nero could see Dante flicking his

wrist, causing *Rebellion* to return to its owner who caught it easily with his other hand. Nero called *Yamato* forth, figuring that he might as well give it a shot- this sword was supposed to cut through anything, right? Although before he could even attempt to cut through the creature's hard shell protecting its soft body, more than a dozen heads were already aiming for the three of them again. They all scattered, jumping into different directions to increase their chance of getting close enough to do some actual damage and Nero could see Dante throwing his sword once again. *Rebellion* cut off another head and damaged one more throat before slowing in mid-air to stop and return. Nero growled as he rolled to the side, evading sharp teeth for the umpteenth time. Sometimes he wanted a sword like that, too. It seemed hella useful. Not to mention that it would speed this fight up immensely- he was getting more than sick of being forced to constantly try and avoid being skewered. Or digested.

Putting one foot behind his other to strengthen his stance, Nero's eyes locked on one of the heads descending onto him. Instead of diving to the side, however, he stayed where he was, *Yamato* raised and ready. As soon as he could see through its widely opened mouth directly into its cavity, the young hunter seemingly disappeared in a flash, reappearing a couple feet further directly underneath its throat. Which showed to be cut open straight in the middle seconds later, the beast's scream dying in its damaged throat before the accompanying head slumped down to the ground lifelessly. Not wasting any time, he rushed forward again, ignoring the sudden burst of flames on his other side that also cut one of the demon's shrieks short. The sickening smell of burnt flesh he was so familiar with entered his nose and he snorted, his red-glowing eyes focussing on another head that was about to spit the same brown substance out as it had earlier. The moment it started leaving its mouth, he kicked himself off the ground and jumped to the side, but upon hitting the ground with such pressure, the gooey mass splattered in all directions. He avoided most of it, but some sprayed onto what had remained of his coat- and burnt right through it like an acid, sizzling and smoking. Slightly bewildered, he sent a brief prayer of gratitude in the direction he'd last seen Tōya in- getting hit with a whole load of this stuff would have been- *uncomfortable*, to say the least.

"Tōya!"

Nero's head snapped to his right, alarmed at the shout, but all he could see was Atsuma standing still, one arm raised into the air and red light gathering in his skyward palm. Another small ball of light, this one light blue in colour, came flying from behind them and swirled around the other before merging with it. And to both his surprise and amazement, another light spontaneously formed at his *Devil Bringer*. It was a darker shade of blue, exactly the same as the spirit towering behind him and it instantly floated over to Atsuma to join the others. The ball turned orange and started spreading, first covering the student's hand and then his arm before it began drawing more of those patterns he'd already seen into the air. But instead of staying like that, the lines quickly turned into fire and Nero did a double-take when he realised it was adapting the shape of a giant bird- or rather Phoenix. As soon as it was complete, the majestic looking bird made out of flames straightened once before leaning down again, following the movement's of Atsuma's hand as he led it towards their enemy. It flew right into the beast's body, engulfing it in fire that quickly caused the creature to start screeching again in pain. Smoke was rising from its body even

before the phoenix had passed it entirely to finally dissipate behind it, leaving scorch marks all over its shell. Another two heads had failed to get out of the firebird's way and were now rendered use- and lifeless, leaving only charred clumps behind that were attached to twitching throats.

Even though about half of the beast's necks were incapacitated and rendered harmless, it was not about to give in. Quite the contrary, actually, because a mighty roar erupted out of its remaining throats, chunks of the brown acid as well as frothy saliva raining down on the three of them. Nero brought up his arms to cover his face and saw his two companions doing the same. Bits of the mud-coloured substance hit each of them, smoke rising from their melting clothes and burning skin. What they couldn't see, however, was the demon raising its massive body high into the air, supported by short, but sturdy legs no one realised it had hidden underneath its impenetrable shell. It lifted its corpus about seven or eight feet up and stayed like that for a moment, swaying a little back and forth-

And then, at least 40 tonnes of flesh, bones and shell came crashing down onto the ground.

Nero let out a startled shout and accidentally let himself de-trigger out of surprise as the floor beneath his feet started shaking, tears appearing in the abused earth. He almost lost his balance and stumbled a couple steps back, the ground rumbling and moving underneath his boots. Apparently, there were some caves or other empty rooms underground, for he could see entire chunks of the surface simply breaking away, leaving dark holes behind that seemed to go a lot deeper than anyone might have guessed beforehand. The young hunter ripped his *Red Queen* off his back and stabbed it into the ground in front of him, holding tight onto its handle in order to aid his struggle against this artificial earthquake. He could see Dante doing the same, *Rebellion* halfway buried in a chunk of earth that resisted the rumbling and shaking caused by the monster. At the same time his relative lifted his head to focus on said beast, probably already devising a plan to take this thing down *fast* despite the floor breaking apart beneath them, he heard a yelp on his other side followed by the thundering noise of shattering earth.

Turning his head just in time to see the ground underneath Atsuma giving away, causing the student to fall back into one of the deep-looking cave-ins, Nero felt his blood run cold. Not wasting even a split second to think, he let go of his *Red Queen* and rushed over, skidding to a halt on the slippery floor directly in front of the hole he'd seen his new friend fall into. He knelt down at the edge, ignoring the bits and pieces of stone breaking off and falling into the darkness with small *clinks*. His vision was slightly blurred from the still moving and shaking earth, but he could make Atsuma's bright red uniform out just fine- he was just swinging onto a small platform in the face of the freshly created cliff with some sort of grapple. His quick reaction had obviously saved him so far, but his face was more than a little pale. Nero could see his eyes widen when Atsuma spotted him crouching at the edge of the miniature cliff above him.

"ATSUMA!"

Tōya was at Nero's side immediately, his face entirely void of its usual calm and instead distorted in a grimace of raw panic as he dropped to the ground, air leaving his lungs in ragged and faltering breaths.

Nero didn't pay him any mind as he lowered himself even further onto the floor, as far as his position allowed. The ground was still rumbling, the earthquake still causing more rifts. Lying down to increase his reach would've been too dangerous just in case the surface right underneath him was going to give in, too. Leaning forward to a dangerous degree, he clung to the edge of the cliff he was crouching at, reaching down with his *Devil Bringer*. After a short moment of hesitation, Atsuma lifted his right arm, stretching his body as far up as it allowed. The ledge he was standing on was crumbling underneath him, promising him a very deep descend if they didn't hurry.

Their fingertips touched and Nero felt a jolt running through his arm as if it had been electrified. Judging the way the other man twitched violently as well, he'd probably felt it, too, but he kept reaching up. The part-devil strained his shoulder as much as he could without dislocating it- not that it would be a lasting problem, but if there was something lacking right now, it was time to let it heal again. Their fingers brushed against each other a few more times, each contact shooting another spark through his *Devil Bringer*. After a few more tries, their palms finally, *finally* connected and their fingers clasped instantly, both putting all their considerable strength into this deathgrip. Oddly enough, Nero was suddenly sure his fingers would be broken if he was anyone else, but he quickly pushed that thought aside again. The current in his demonic limb increased, heating it up and causing a restlessness to invade him. Ignoring this reaction, however, Nero pushed with his human hand against the ground as he lifted Atsuma up. The first inches were slow, but as soon as he could use his shoulders as leverage as well, he hauled the older man over the edge of the cliff and back into safety, the force behind this movement causing the freshly rescued student to stumble forward a little. It didn't hide the fact, however, that he, too, was apparently feeling something unusual. His face was contorted in exertion and he was gripping his right wrist tightly as his legs gave in.

Nero let out a breath he didn't know he was holding and dropped to his knees as well. He was panting, mostly because of his strangely behaving arm. It was glowing a bright blue, much brighter than he'd ever seen before. One look to Atsuma revealed that he, too, seemed to be struggling with his own particular appendage again. The golden lines were back, pulsating in an almost soothing rhythm as the student was clutching his wrist. He heard a moan leaving his lips and as Atsuma lifted his head, Nero noticed that his right eye, normally purple, was glowing scarlet as well as a dark patch forming around it. The light from his artificial limb shone brighter and brighter before it seemingly *left* the skin, wandering up his biceps and reaching his shoulder as it turned into fine, swirling lines that were red in colour, his entire arm turning black. And then, just like that, outgrowths spread on his shoulder, ragged at the edges as if they were carved from rocks.

His own arm was getting unbearably hot and Nero felt his vision being blinded by a curtain of red. His blood was boiling and he suddenly felt an indescribable thirst for power and revenge and the desire to *hurt and harm and destroy and killkillKILL*, almost

overtaking him. He fell to his knees, his chest heaving and his eyes shut tight as he struggled to force those urges down. It wasn't as if his *Devil Bringer* had always been entirely silent- he remembered that time very well when it had yearned for more strength back in Agnus' lab, when he'd toed the line between life and death. But this was different, it was much stronger and more nuanced, but at the same time, it also felt more basic, as if it was its *purpose* instead of desire.

He heard Atsuma moan in an inhuman voice next to him, also crouched on the floor as he seemed to be fighting his own battle with the power residing within his artificial arm. Through his veiled vision, he could barely make out Tōya who was still lacking his earlier composure entirely as he was staring at the two of them, jaw slack and eyes widened.

"Goddamnit... *I'm your Master!*", he heard Atsuma growl, voice growing louder at the end of his sentence. He punched the ground with his transformed arm, which only caused it to glow even brighter, red lines flashing menacingly as the student finished with a drawn-out shout from deep within his lungs.

This was the moment Nero realised that their arms seemed to not just react to, but actually *affect* each other somehow, because in the same second Atsuma seemed to inwardly arch against the demands of his own limb, was the feeling in his *Devil Bringer* intensifying as well. As if through cotton, he could feel Dante's demonic energy flickering back and forth, erratic as if its inner balance was being disturbed by the two of them but quite frankly, Nero couldn't care less. Dante was more than capable of watching his own butt, proven by the fact that he'd managed to keep the gigantic beast occupied as he and Atsuma were fighting their own, personal demons.

He was gritting his teeth so hard he could feel his jaw cracking when, all of a sudden, the entire outburst of primal desires and instincts simply vanished, leaving only a gentle hum and the familiar part of his demonic heritage behind. He slowly opened his eyes, vision as sharp as ever, as he carefully climbed to his feet. To his surprise, Atsuma was not only as still as a statue now, but also deadly silent. His eyes were closed and the rapidly flashing lines on his now obviously inhuman arm stopped blinking frantically, resuming their slow, rhythmic pulsing Nero had almost gotten used to by now instead. Then, the black fingers twitched and Atsuma opened his eyes again before cautiously rising to stand. The buzz inside of Nero's *Devil Bringer* seemed to resonate with the older male's movements and he unconsciously shifted his weight to shoot a contemplative look at it. Atsuma's head whipped up and he stared at Nero as the latter moved- okay, apparently, his *Devil Bringer* wasn't reacting to Atsuma's artificial arm, they were reacting to each other. Interesting. He had no idea why or how or what for, but it was definitely interesting.

Their eyes locked and after a short moment, Nero felt a smirk sneaking its way onto his face, mirrored by the grin Atsuma's lips were curling into. It almost seemed as if they understood each other entirely without words now and without further ado, they both nodded and rushed towards the gigantic creature that had been all but forgotten, having had only Dante as a playmate for the previous minutes. Summoning forth *Yamato* once more, he and Atsuma could approach the demon freely as it was much too occupied with Dante- who was jumping from head to head, looking as if he

was having the time of his life every time he caused the heads to bite one another in their attempt to get him off. The young part-devil snorted- *figured* that Dante would turn this into a game while everyone else was struggling with inhuman body parts and supernatural beings within those body parts.

As soon as he was close enough, Nero flash-stepped onto the other side of the beast, going entirely unnoticed. At least, until the beast momentarily stilled as cuts appeared on its shell- before it fell apart, some of the plates sliding to the ground with heavy *thuds* and revealing soft, green flesh. The same second the monster decided that Dante was the lesser threat and instead turned its remaining heads to Nero, did Atsuma draw his black-and-red arm back as he was still running, white light gathering around it, before throwing himself fist-first into the demon's vulnerable, unprotected side.

A ripple went through its soft body and it stopped moving entirely. It wasn't dead yet, however, so Nero vanished *Yamato* again, calling his spectral arm forth instead and let it grow in size until it was almost as big as it had been when he'd crushed the Saviour's head back in Fortuna. He leaned back, balancing on his right leg in order to put as much force as possible into this punch and could see Atsuma doing the same on the beast's other side. A growling shout tore free from his vocal chords, in tune with the ever-increasing hum in his demonic arm as he threw his body forward, his motion mirrored twenty-five feet away from him, and felt his fist connecting hard with the green body, the much larger phantom version above him doing the same.

And finally- *finally* did the beast let out its final wail, a cry so high-pitched and loud Nero had to cover his ears as they ripped out of multiple throats at the same time. The massive body started to melt, the remains sinking onto the ground and disappearing as its initial form was distorted by the bubbles rising to the liquid's surface. Three minutes later, the creature was gone as well as what had been left of it, only the destroyed ground with miniature canyons and ragged earth everywhere providing evidence of the battle that had transpired here.

And two bodies of young men returned to their human form again, adrenaline leaving their veins and making space for the exhaustion that followed, and they sank to their knees.