

Chapter 26: Fallout's a bitch. Not a sexy one either. Rebound's a hit or miss though.

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Kzzt.

“-view with the Maou Falbium tonight to discuss the recent revelations about the thought dead Sekiryuutei and the controversies-”

Ksst.

“Rumored that Heaven is under a state of lockdown to calm down the protests regarding what the long presumed dead Sekiryuutei revealed just three days ago. No direct word from any of the Seraphs has been made as of yet while extensive effort to verify the existence of the twelve newborn-”

Kzzt.

“Riots in the streets in multiple high populated Fallen territories are still going strong as the populace demands answers from their leadership regarding the formerly presumed dead Sekiryuutei's statements regarding the delayed potential breakthroughs to address Infanti Ame Damne Hypo Peccatum Syndrome, which is the leading cause for their high infant mortality ra-”

Kzzt.

“The dragons have been unusually silent ever since the Sekiryuutei's reappearance three days ago, leading to suspicion that they had been aware of his condition if not whereabouts ever since his rampage over five years ago. No word yet has been received from any major party from Tiamat or her delegation-”

Kzzt.

“We now resume our review of the Sekiryuutei's attack on the Bael territory five years ago. What we know. What is currently veiled by the Grigori's information inhibiting magic, and what we can speculate. Mr. Mabel, we were going on about the dragons before.”

“Of course. As we were talking about before, there are countless reports of elevated aggression levels of the Dragons not just after the rampage, but during it as well. What

few documents and pictures we can recover clearly show that the Sekiryuutei was not the only dragon that actively set the Bael territory ablaze, rather it appeared as though he was accompanied by an entire army of them during the event. However even to this day we have yet to identify a single one, and the remaining resources and connections still available with the known tribes and conclaves of the world have all unanimously stated that neither they nor their own associates participated in the-

Kzzt.

“In spite of ramping pressure, we have still yet to receive word or explanation from the Bael household for the rumors regarding the Sekiryuutei spreading like wildfire around the-

Kzzt.

“Tyler’s underworld famous discount adult sex shop! Buy three vibrators and get your fourth-

Kzzt.

“I AM ZIIIIIIIM!! BOW BEFORE ME YOU PITIFUL FILTHY UNCLEAN EARTH MONKEYS!!!”

Kzzt.

“-Alima are working our hardest to get to the bottom of these ludicrous rumors regarding our leader and its founding. Rest assured, the people will know the truth from us, and those responsible for disrupting the lives and the faith of our supporters will be brought to face the consequences of their act-

Kzzt.

“-Ridiculous. Anyone that has witnessed the recordings of incident firsthand can tell that the Sekiryuutei is as unhinged as ever. Five years has done nothing to clear that mad fool’s derangement, and he clearly lives in a reality completely separate from our own.”

“That is one popular opinion. But that begs the question then as to why the leaders of the three main factions seem to be on his side despite being candid with what they are willing to tell us? Or that the Bael family have yet to make any official statements? Could the rumors of the gag order the Sekiryuutei alluded to have any substance?”

“Of course not. It’s tripe, much like virtually everything else that came out of that fool’s mouth. Really, how can anyone believe that an immature child like that be capable of bachelor’s degree at all? Much less a PHD before he was a teenager? Don’t be ridiculous. No, it’s more likely that there was some sort of agreement made with-

Kzzt.

“-still not seen or heard from the heiress and president of the Ig Alima organization Carnelian Bael, after the surprising events three days ago at what was supposed to be the party where the youngest generations of Gremory and Phoenix were to officially declare their union-”

Kzzt.

“Access to Japan from the underworld is still heavily restricted by all factions and affiliates in reaction to the revelation to the Sekiryuutei’s survival and residence in the country. No word yet has been received as to his exact whereabouts, activity, or intentions as of yet, however this crew will do its best to keep its audience-”

Kzzt.

“It’s impressive in a way. The fact that you were quite literally in the middle of this mess, and yet next to nobody is paying you any mind.”

Rias glared at Akeno standing dutifully behind her while they sat in the lounge of the notably large upscale apartment they had been staying in, unofficially contained, ever since she had left the disaster of a party. Enough rooms, services, and accommodations to house a family of twenty comfortably if so desired, and the Crimson Ruin Princess never felt more confined.

None of her peerage was allowed to return to Kuoh, or contact with the outside world. Much less Issei for that matter.

Speaking of her peerage, they hadn’t taken it too kindly when they had found out that she had managed to piece together that Issei was the Sekiryuutei and didn’t tell them. They understood why she didn’t, but the revelation was still a sore spot for them. Between that and Issei’s reveal itself, the bulk of her pieces weren’t particularly eager to talk to her in earnest at the moment unless it was about new developments.

Not that there was much of that either.

Speculation, conspiracies, and anger was all over the news. All the main factions were in crisis mode trying to regain order, to the point that Rias doubted that the Maou, much less her brother would be able to find time to contact her about her situation, much less allow her to go back to Kuoh.

... To Issei.

“You know that in a way, it would have been better if they did.” Her king just as evenly replied.

“If someone did falter in their responsibilities again, there would be no doubt that Kuoh would be set ablaze already.” Akeno shrugged as though it was someone else’s problem. There was no question that Issei had been barely hanging onto his sanity when he had left, and it would be a long time before he would manage to regain enough self control to deal with another potential disaster.”

“The way things are, I don’t know if we’d be among the first or last to know if that happened.” Slouching in seat and leaning back, she looked up at the ceiling.

She hated this. She hated being powerless. She hated being shunted to the side “for her own good”. It was part of the reason why she went to Kuoh. To get away from it all...

Or at least, that's what she thought at the time.

Thinking back on it all, when she had been looking at places to take up with Sona, and Sirzechs had brought up the seemingly quiet town in Japan, she had thought nothing of it at first. She had been looking for territory in Japan to begin with due to being a Japanophile, but something about Kuoh in particular just... spoke out to her. Lured her there in particular...

Just like...

Kzzt.

Akeno changed the channel on the television, this time to an interview with Azazel.

The leader of the Fallen Angels clearly had been run ragged with work from all the interviews and keeping his people in line.

What really stood out though was the dark shiner of a black eye he was sporting in front of the world.

“Lord Azazel! What is the story with your injury!? Did you get into a fight?! Was it the Sekiryuutei that did it?!” One interviewer shouted.

The Lord Governor laughed as though he was telling an embarrassing secret. “It can’t be called much of a fight. Let’s just say that there’s more than the Sekiryuutei to look out for if you try to get close. And they aren’t too fond of what’s happened recently either.”

“Asami-san?” Akeno asked a rhetorical question.

“Asami.” Rias nodded confidently. “I would not be surprised if Issei was the one that taught her how to throw a punch. I can’t tell what’s more surprising though. That Azazel hasn’t healed it up yet, or that she actually hit him hard enough to leave that much

damage. Even if he wasn't reinforcing himself, he's still a Twelve Winged Fallen. His body should be tough enough to take the hit from a human without a scratch."

"I suppose we'll just chalk it up to another mystery to blame on Issei then." Akeno sighed before flinching at the glare Rias gave her, "Ara, perhaps not the best choice of words given the circumstances."

"Perhaps not." Rias agreed before closing her eyes. "... Be honest Akeno, what do you make of all of this personally?"

"Hmmm. I do feel some sympathy for Issei. It would be a lie to say otherwise, but his efforts to put everyone at arm's length at the very least weren't ineffective. Outside of you and Gasper, he hasn't gotten terribly close to anyone in particular."

"Akeno." Rias sighed, not fooled by the non-answer she had been given.

The perpetually smiling Queen gave a lackadaisical sigh and looked at her King. "I do not have much more of an answer than that Rias. I mean it. His efforts to distance himself did yield results. Especially in my case. You know how cautious he is with me for whatever reason he has. Even if his training was beneficial, and my understanding of him is better than most, my input isn't ideal on the matter."

"And here I thought that you may have reasoned as to why he reacts the way he does to you after finding out who he was." Rias shook her head in disappointment. There was clearly something going on between Akeno and Issei in their past that neither knew about. Akeno wouldn't keep showing up in the peculiar corner of his subconscious if it wasn't the case. He wasn't this wary or react this way around Raynare, Azazel, or other Fallen from what she could tell. Only Akeno. "But that still doesn't answer my question."

"What would you have me say? He's like a cross between Gasper and Kiba when you first found them, violently unwilling to reach out to anyone, and terrified of what they could do to everyone if they lost control. Only unlike them, he's not a part of the peerage." Akeno shrugged helplessly. "I can't deny that he's impressive. If even half of what he claims is somehow true, then I would even hazard to say that all the efforts that the leaders of the Factions have put into him are actually warranted. If I am to feel anything about all of this, I am disappointed and enraged at your brother and the other Maou for putting you and Sona-sama in the positions you are in without even telling you."

Rias looked at her Queen almost disappointed in the answer before sighing in defeat. Akeno was right. From an outside perspective, Issei had done a wonderful job of keeping everyone away whenever possible. Whether out of fear or to minimize the potential fallout spreading to others was anyone's guess. If Akeno was a bit more curious as to why Issei reacted the way he did about her, maybe there would be something more

between them, but as it stood, he had been successful keeping her away. Kiba was of the same mind most likely.

Gaspar and Koneko on the other hand...

Knock knock.

Her musings were interrupted as someone announced their arrival at the main entrance of the apartment, which was rare as the premises was under high guard and nobody came in unless it was to deliver food or a request that one of the occupants had made to the guards.

“Please pardon me.”

Rias turned around to see Grayfia entering the room, bowing politely as she did so in apologies for potentially interrupting something.

“Grayfia. I’m surprised. With how chaotic everything has been as of late, I half expected you, or anyone for that matter, to not visit for a week at least.” Rias greeted her sister in law with a half cooled tone.

“Lord Sirzechs and the other Maou have been working without rest to address the discontent among our kind. Fortunately, he has managed to work himself some minor time off with your niece and nephew today, allowing me to visit and update you on the situation at hand.”

“You sound as though I am actually relevant for anything right now. Wasn’t that supposed to be part of your plan?” The Crimson Ruin Princess scoffed. She knew she was being petty, but she wasn’t particularly in the mood to pretend that all was right with the world either.

“It was, however the fallout has proven to be far greater than anticipated. The revelation of Issei’s survival alone would have caused major disruptions regardless, but...” Grayfia trailed off for a moment before getting back on topic. “Your lord brother has decided that it would be best if you did not return to Kuoh for the foreseeable future.”

“He WHAT?!” Rias didn’t even try to hide her displeasure as she shot up to her feet in pure rage and indignation. It was abrupt enough that Koneko, Gaspar and Kiba all ran out of their personal rooms seconds later to see what had pissed off their king so badly.

“What’s going on?” Gaspar asked from the stairs.

“Something happened.” Koneko frowned, appearing next to him.

“...” Kiba didn't say anything as he somehow appeared in the living room without anyone noticing, his eyes darting between Grayfia and Rias.

The most powerful Queen in the world did not react to the outburst, or their appearance. She had expected as much to happen to the news.

“Kuoh, and Japan for that matter, is under a great deal of scrutiny, not only from the three Factions, but other international parties as well. The reveal of the Sekiryuutei's survival has caught more interests and ears than what most know. Enough so that entrusting his security to young Devils like yourselves, as talented as you are, is not only a haphazard gesture at best, but one that will send the wrong messages to the world at large.”

“And you think isolating him further will make things better?!” Rias balked at what she was hearing. “You saw what he's like now! He's unstable, traumatized, and terrified of people on a good day! If what... *SHE* said is right, by the time he recovers and calms down, if ever on his own, he'll already be dead!”

She didn't want to acknowledge the idea that Issei was actually dying, but too many pieces of his history and behavior fit into place when it was taken into consideration. The fact that Issei more or less brushed over the fact when it was brought up might as well have been a confirmation to anyone that knew him well.

“And the alternative?” Grayfia calmly countered, “Nobody can risk him having another outburst. Whether out of the destruction he'd cause, or due to the risk of him burning up the remains of his life force.”

She turned to the television where Azazel was still on the screen sporting his black eye.

“Allow me to clarify the situation to some extent. The Sekiryuutei's sanity is hanging on by a thread as of now. He does not engage in conversation, nor attempt to interact with anybody, and has withdrawn himself to his room, rebuffing anyone that even attempts to enter or communicate him viciously at a base. This includes those that still remain in his home, including Asami-san. He has for all intents and purposes regressed into the state he had been in shortly after his initial outburst in the Bael territory. Seeing as his initial interactions with you and your associates was the Maou's idea alongside Azazel and Michael, Asami-san has taken what has transpired as a severe breach of trust and is unlikely to give any of us the benefit of the doubt. As you have seen.”

“... Did she know? About Issei's father?”

“... You will have to discuss that topic with her. Azazel was her primary contact over the past few years.” Grayfia replied diplomatically.

Meaning yes, she did know.

No wonder Issei had shut her out too.

“And Jasmine?” Rias pressed. “She’s supposed to be Issei’s biggest crutch to sanity. Where is she during all this madness?”

Grayfia frowned slightly. “You are very fortunate this facility is secure. Jasmine Redsmith is more valuable to the three factions than you assume... but to answer your question, she has other obligations that you are unaware of. Obligations that has tied her down immensely due to this turn of events, lest the situation at hand devolve even further than you could possibly realize. If she could make some time to console Issei without severe ramifications, she would without question. But she is unfortunately unable to for the foreseeable future. As is the White Dragon Emperor, although from what I have been informed that may change soon.”

“So you mean to tell me that my brother’s brilliant plan is to simply wait and see what happens while treating Issei like he’s essentially Chernobyl?”

“I see that you have adapted some of his vernacular habits.” The maid almost sounded amused, “But no. There are some other sources and assets that are making preparations to Kuoh as we speak that are more suited to handle Issei should his mental state deteriorate any further-”

“What about trying to help him get better?!” Rias snapped, cutting Grayfia off.

If she expected her loss of temper to get a reaction out of Grayfia, she would be disappointed. “What would you have us do then in this situation, Rias? Given the circumstances, who is available that he can remotely trust right now that isn’t already at his home? What little good will the three factions had managed to recover has been reduced to ash. He will interpret any attempt to reach out to him as nothing more than another vain effort to satisfy our desires at the cost of what little integrity and stability he has left, true or not.”

“And you think leaving him alone is any better? You should know him better than we do! You know how often he withdraws and beats himself up whenever he thinks nobody is looking! It’s astounding that he managed to muster up enough self control to come outside the first time!”

Rias couldn’t help but be dumbfounded by the logic she was hearing. Leaving trauma victims alone to their thoughts for extended periods of time was one of the worst things you could do. Much less when they’re having a severe relapse.

It was so unbearably frustrating. People meaning well, but acting in one way or another out of fear or priorities or politics or...

Oh.



“Ha. Haha. I get it now.” Rias couldn’t help but laugh mockingly. At herself, Grayfia, and the irony in general. “I finally get it. I complained about the same exact thing when trying to deal with Riser, but couldn’t recognize the same thing when it was right in front of my face the entire time.”

“Rias?” Grayfia wasn’t the only one confused at her confession if the other teen’s expressions were any indication.

“Issei’s right. We’re all... fucking idiots. Blind, selfish idiots that wouldn’t be able to see the obvious even if it smacked us all across the face. It’s no wonder he can’t take anyone seriously.” Rias continued to laugh in a self-deprecating way at the crude admission with language that normally would never escape her lips, before donning a serious expression. “This is ridiculous.”

Grayfia frowned as Rias marched past her as if she didn’t matter. “Where are you going?”

“To Kuoh. Obviously.”

“Ara?”

“Huh?”

“Wait what?”

“I find that hard to believe.” Grayfia took the announcement better than the peerage. “You are still under house arrest. The security personnel here is not simply for show. Even if your Peerage attempted to leave, you would not be able to force your way out, regardless of how well you performed against Riser. And that does not take into account the security around Japan and Kuoh right now. Your attempt would be a futile one.”

Rias didn’t seem to take the news well and glared at the maid. “I’m *going* to Kuoh, Grayfia. One way or another. Now either you can help me, or you can explain to my brother this afternoon why my name and face will be across the news for breaking whatever laws he has in place after putting so much effort to ensure that everyone forgot I existed.”

The most powerful Queen frowned at the empty ultimatum. They both knew that had she so desired, Grayfia could down Rias’ entire peerage in an instant before they could manage to step out of the room, much less the building.

“... Hah. If you are so adamant about making matters more difficult than they already are for everyone, then the best I supposed I can do is mitigate the damage.”

Everyone gave the maid a double take. They had all been expecting a fight or some discourse to break out any second, but for Grayfia to simply give up was unprecedented.

“... You were planning on letting me go from the start,” Rias frowned, annoyed.

“I have no idea why you came to such a ridiculous conclusion. Your argument simply convinced me to take the least disastrous option.” Grayfia’s diplomatic response didn’t convince anyone. “That said, if you are adamant about risking your life to try and engage Issei, I at the very least should chaperone you on your trip and inform you of several factors that have transpired as of late, and a few other key details that you may find informative.”

“Such as?”

The Maid’s expression was completely impassive. “While it hasn’t been announced yet, your cousin Sairaorg Bael, along with his brother and mother, have been missing since the night of the party. All three of them have not been seen by the public, nobility, or unconventional resources for three days.”

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