Chapter 20: What’s the best sort of bullshit you ask? The wet and sloppy kind that just gets everywhere and takes forever to wash out. You never forget dealing with that crap.

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o. o. o.

Six years ago:

“So what do you think Snowball?” Issei asked as he laid out what they had and their intended goals in front of the latest addition to their merry band of misfits.

The mousy albino freshman couldn’t help but constantly jump between documents as if trying to convince herself that they were real. “You three did all of this by yourselves in just a year?”

“I did some basic research on the topic for a few years before this. That said, nothing got started in earnest until this year. It was originally my project to begin with. We had help here and there for a couple of things along the way, but most of the legwork was done by us, yeah.” Jasmine yawned. She had spent another long night in the lab and really needed a nap soon. “Though we hoped that with you around, the rest of us could skip a leg day or two so we could get some sleep. Paperwork and legalese isn’t exactly our thing.”

“Nee-san and I did most of the research, material gathering, and testing. And Bird Person got the volunteers, connections, and sponsors.” Issei elaborated. “We have proper documentation and procedures for all that. We just need to get past all the litigation and red tape. We’re dealing with the medical and pharmacy departments, so yeah, it’s a shit ton of tape.”

“Even if you’re dealing with those guys, I don’t see how you should be having this much trouble. If even half of what you have here is true, there should be tons of groups and companies that would be *murdering* one another to sponsor your work by now. Literally.” Carnelian flicked through the paperwork at an ever increasing speed.

The three glanced at one another warily.

“Well if *someone* had not put off the handpicked sponsors Riser had gathered by telling them that a Devil only drug was partially supported by the Grigori…” Riser pointedly glared at Issei.

“Hey those racist morons were going to find out sooner or later! Zaz has a seventeen percent stake share holder! We’re legally obligated to reveal the identities of anyone that owns over *four*. You were supposed to get the retarded Nobles that were the sort that sold out their kind for stupid amounts of money! Not the xenophobic retarded Nobles that were just *bad* with stupid amounts of money!” Issei defended himself. “Hell, they were more interested in trying to screw Nee-san than our project!”

“Not that they got that far. I could tell they were lost causes the moment they tried to chat me up. I side hustle for profit, not pity.” Jas snorted.

“Says the one that made just as much progress with the Quality and Assurance head of experimental pharmaceuticals.” Riser accused.

“You accidentally try to blow the ONE closet homosexual head of office in the entire department that actually takes his job seriously to get things moving a bit faster ONE time…” Due to that fiasco she was barred from even entering the upper levels of the Q&A department without permission and security watching. “I still think that flaky bastard was setting me up. I was on my knees with his pants down and cock in hand before he bothered to put up any fight or reaction. I was not moving fast in the slightest.”

“Never mind. I think I understand why there’s such a holdup.” Carnelian deadpanned as the three bickered to the point of completely forgetting she existed. “I’m surprised you three have gotten this far as is.”

“Bribes and connections.” Riser stated with his chest puffed out.

“A good favor goes a long way. A better favor goes longer.” Jas shrugged, playing with her hair.

“I’m real convincing and or stubborn when I want to be.” Issei smiled and bounced up and down energetically.

*“By letting everyone know that the sooner they cave in and give us what we want, the sooner we’ll go away!”* Ghost cheerfully added in.

**“Sheer stupid luck. Emphasis on stupid.”** Ddraig added his two cents.

“No wonder you needed help.” Carn sagged in defeat. “And the reason why you couldn’t do things the legitimate way?”

All three looked at her as if *she* was the crazy one.

“Right. Politics, an over complex management system, and the incompetent Devil aristocracy. My mistake.”

“It’s fine. Even Bird Person still forgets sometimes, and he was born into this mess.” Issei waved off her mistake.

“Oi!”

Due to Riser’s outburst, nobody noticed the albino teen’s flinch at Issei’s comment.

“Calm down boys, you’re going to scare her off.” Jasmine slapped both males upside the head. “She’s still new to this, remember. We’re lucky we managed to get her to stick with us this long.”

She wisely left out the fact that most of the other managerial and litigation based students that they asked for help either flat out denied them when asked, were scared away within a week of accepting, or were blatantly too incompetent to do anything about their requests.

“It’s not like I had much choice.” Carnelian muttered. “I’m a scholarship student with a vanilla human background. I need to do something outstanding if I’m going to make it anywhere here, and you guys… well, everyone knows of you.”

“Awww. You’re so sweet, trying to be polite and not insult us.” Jasmine swooned.

“Speak for yourself. Riser’s reputation has been at an all-time low since meeting you lot.” Riser snorted.

“Sooo it hasn’t changed much then?” Issei asked. The sad thing was he was being completely genuine with his question.

“You…” Truth be told, Riser reputation has taken a bit of a heavy hit since hanging with the group. Nobility in general were notorious gossips, and Riser had been hanging around an eccentric genius human child and his promiscuous female handler far more than most thought acceptable.

“That said, if this is what you three have been working on trying to pass while driving everyone nuts, then I definitely want in.” Carnelian concluded.

“You sure?” Jas asked skeptically.

“If I get a cut of what comes out of this, and the reputational boost from being involved? Why wouldn’t I?” She asked with a bit more force than expected. “Even if this is only a partial success, the profits from this and doors it can open would set anyone up for life. Even a nobody human like me.”

“Why do you keep on saying that?” Issei tilted his head to the side confused. “You’re a Devil, aren’t you?”

Carnelian froze. “Wh-what? What are you talking about? Didn’t you see my history? I grew up in Ohio.”

“Yeah, to a single human mother.” Issei pointed out factually.

“Aaaah. Fuck. I see what you’re getting at.” Jasmine groaned. “Another “Devil’s Gift”. Issei, shut up. You’re talking about private shit again.”

The boy winced as his mind caught up to him. “I, crap! Sorry! I’m so sorry Snowball! I’ll make it up to you! I won’t talk about it again!”

“Devil’s Gift?” Riser blinked in confusion. “I’m unfamiliar with the term.”

“Seriously?” Jasmine balked before glancing at Carnelian. “Look. We’ll tell you later. It’s not exactly…”

“It’s fine.” The albino sighed. “I, it was going to come out sooner or later. Secrets don’t tend to remain intact if you spend time near Azazel from what I’ve heard.”

“You sure?” The older female asked warily. It was a pretty heavy topic after all.

“Yeah. Might as well tell him before it gets out of hand.”

“Well?” Riser probed skeptically.

Issei and Jasmine glanced at one another before the former stepped in. “A “Devil’s Gift” is a street term for a bastard between a Devil and Human. Normally an accidental product of a commissioned one night stand requested by the latter, but it isn’t uncommon for it to happen when a male from a Noble family decides to get a bit crazy during a night of partying in the human world.”

“Human women have a higher fertility rate with Devil offspring than Devil women, so ironically, despite Devil kind’s very dedicated efforts to repopulate its pureblood pool, it’s estimated that there’s roughly fifty percent more hybrids walking around this generation than purebloods.” Jasmine elaborated. “Hell, if our numbers are right, half of the extinct Noble Pillars could be repopulated almost instantly if you lot accepted mix breed descendants.”

*That* last rumor Riser *had* heard in passing over the years. He had brushed it off as mere hearsay in the past, but if Jasmine and Issei were the ones that considered it plausible, then he reluctantly had to admit that there might be some validity to it.

“Of course, most of the ones that do try to make the claim that they’re related to someone from Devil Aristocracy have a tendency of well, *disappearing*.” Issei winced, glancing at Snowball, who made it a point to try and not draw attention to herself.

“… Ah.” Riser got the point that the pair were trying to make. With some effort, he stood up tall and cleared his throat. “My apologies. Rest assured. This conversation never happened.”

“I-it’s fine. You didn’t know.” Carnelian smiled halfheartedly.

“Yeah, and it’s not like she’s the first mixed race we hang out with anyways.” Issei shrugged.

“Yeah. Wait what?” Jasmine did a doubletake. “Someone else we know is a mix?”

“Yeah. Ass-man. You didn’t know?” Issei shrugged. “He’s also half Devil. I put him down as that when he helps us out sometimes with some of our experimental medicine.”

“I… huh.” In Jasmine’s rather feeble defense, she tended to overlook her sample testers’ names when she went over the test results unless there was something distinctively unique or wrong with their results.

“Riser was not aware of this.” Then again, Riser did not spend much time with Vali to begin with whenever Issei wasn’t around. “Upon retrospection, Riser is also wary of asking what young Vali’s lineage is as well. Anyone and anything related to our idiot here tends to have the potential to be far more trouble than its worth.”

“Relax. Ass-man isn’t a part of the Seventy-two Pillars.” Issei waved them off.

“Shit. He’s related to someone worse.” Jasmine immediately went to a worst case scenario. Issei flinching at her conclusion didn’t help his case either.

“Issei. Riser is being serious. Will young Vali’s family history be a problem for us?” Riser leaned forward and sternly stared down Issei.

“No! I mean, maybe? I mean, Zaz was already doing his thing to make sure nothing would happen before I even met Ass-man! There’s not much more we can do even if we wanted to!” Issei floundered. “You don’t have to worry. He *hates* the Devil part of his family! They’re all major assholes even by our standards!”

“Well, this does explain why Vali doesn’t like showing off in public.” Jasmine hummed in thought. “Come to think of it, he doesn’t really expose himself to many people that aren’t in the know about our group to begin with. I doubt anyone even knows he exists outside of being that insane kid that’s always bugging Issei for a fight.”

“Can we not go any deeper than that?” Issei pleaded. “I’m normally pretty open about things, but this is real personal stuff for him.”

Jasmine and Riser glanced at one another skeptically. It wasn’t often that Issei willingly tried to push away from a topic that was sensitive for someone else. “Fine. Have it your way. No real point in pissing off that kid to begin with. It’s his story.”

“Um.” Carnelian spoke up, reminding them she was there. “Just for future reference, Issei, how did you know that I was part Devil?”

“Your trapezeus, teres major and minor muscles.” Issei stated factually.

“What?”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. “Remember when he gave you that massage a week ago? Devil, Angel, and Fallen back muscles are set up differently than those of humans because of their wings. Not by much, but for an OCD nut like Issei it’s enough to figure you out then and there. Don’t worry, you’re not going to be called out by some random ass on the street here.”

“The college campus is recognized as neutral grounds regardless. Anyone that brings unnecessary conflict here does not last long.” Riser nodded in agreement before giving Carn a gentle smile. “And even if that is not the case, you will find that you are in reliable company. We protect our own.”

“Relax. You’re in with the misfits now.” Jasmine smirked. “Riser’s a noble ass. I’m a degenerate whore. And Issei’s the sort of sociopathic child genius that you’d expect will either bring in a new age or destroy the planet by the time he hits his peak.”

“Screw the planet. I just want my Harem.”

“As you can see, we’re all doomed.” Riser lamented sarcastically before looking at Carn warmly. “If, rather when, you require a bastian of stability, please don’t hesitate to ask for my aid. I shall accommodate you to the best of my ability.”

“Hey, why don’t you treat us like that?” Issei asked somewhat hurt.

“Because my bastian is a place I deemed to be sane and quiet. Not a prison to contain your chaos and debauchery.”

“In other words it’s too boring for us plebs.” Jasmine supplemented with a wry smile.

“Oh. Okay then.”

“I hate the both of you.”

Their banter was interrupted with a light giggle. Three pairs of eyes turned to see the albino laughing at their banter.

“Sorry. It’s just, it’s refreshing to see a group like you being so carefree.” Carnelian explained her mirth while holding up one of the documents in hand. “Especially when you are working on projects as important as this. I doubt there would ever be a dull moment with you around.”

“That’s exactly the problem.” Riser deadpanned, getting slapped upside the head by Jasmine.

“So you’re going to stay with us Snowball?” Issei asked with shining eyes.

“For now. You do need to work on your sales pitch though.” The girl smiled.

“Yes!” Issei cheered.

“She’s not a part of your Harem you idiot.” Jasmine pointed in a tone that indicated that she doubted he heard her.

“She’s in!” Issei didn’t hear her.

“Do not be afraid to harm the fool if he invades your personal space. He’s rather apt at healing his own injuries, and the bulk of the school body is perfectly aware of his eccentricities and what is required to stop him.” Riser advised. “On a side note, you’ll soon learn why there are so many crowbars in the campus facilities.”

Surprisingly, they were in fact more effective at their original intended use than they were as improvised weapons.

“Aha. Ah. Thanks, but I’ll try to stick to the more diplomatic methods for the time being.” Carn turned back to the small pile of documents in front of her. “It’s going to take me some time to get through all of this though. Do you guys have a list of contacts I can work with?”

“In the index documentation on the top.” Jas pointed out, knowing just how valuable contacts were. “Hold on. Just give me a moment to point out which ones are still willing to talk to us for the next week.”

It was the start of a golden age. An age of growth. Of progression. Of development.

“This is awesome! Hey, Snowball, how good are you at registering patents? I made like, thirty sex toys that I’m ninety percent sure would get past screening and safety testing.”

“Doesn’t Azazel do that for you already?”

“Yeah. For twenty percent of the profits, and another forty for production costs from the shops he owns that mass produces them. The guy deserves his fair share, but I’m not bending over and taking the jerk raw if I can help it. That’s what his Faction’s for and they already do it with a smile on their faces.”

“Fair enough. You have a point.”

“Aha. Ahahaha…”

“A word of advice. Don’t give those two an inch with their requests and madness. You’ll lose any hope of regaining control over your existence if you lose yourself in it all.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

It was the start of something that would grow far out of their control.

o. o. o.

Present Day:

“Is everything in order then?”

“Mmm.” Rias affirmed Grayfia’s inquisition over the magic circle. They would be having this conversation again in an hour or so, but the latter time was merely for formalities and a show just before the main event. Right now, the dull diplomatic pre-procedures and paperwork behind the scenes were taking place.

“It’s not too late to back down, Rias.” Riser scoffed, also in on the conversation. “You’re not doing anyone any favors by going through with this tantrum of yours.”

He did have a point. Internal dispute or not, from an outside perspective, what Riser was doing could easily be seen as blatant bullying. A fresh and undersized Peerage vs. a moderately seasoned and fully stocked one? It was just embarrassing. Win or lose, this entire event would not do his image any favors.

In fact, the only logical reason why he would go through with it in the first place was to put Rias in her place and force her to accept the betrothal agreement.

“Don’t worry. My Peerage and I have undergone special training just for today.” She put in some extra sugar in her tone just to underscore just how confident she was that at the very least she was going to betray his expectations. “So much so that they’d be awfully put out if I called it quits now. I am quite confident that we will more than perform beyond everyone’s expectations.”

“Humph. Riser has heard and been left disappointed by that boast far too many times before.”

Hook.

The Gremory Heiress didn’t even try to hide the fact that she was luring the conversation somewhere specific. “If you are that confident in your victory, then I don’t suppose you wouldn’t mind allowing me to have a minor handicap then, would you?”

“Hoh? Desperately grabbing at table scraps even now?”

“Madame. At this stage the rules of the Rating Game have already been set. We cannot alter them at this point.” Grayfia chided politely.

“Don’t worry. I am not requesting for anything absurd or excessive.” Rias waved off their insults and concerns. “All I wish is mere validation and confirmation on something for today’s events. Information is key in a Rating Game after all.”

Line.

“That’s all? To know if your guess is right or not? How dull.” Riser scoffed. “Very well. Ask your question. I suppose you deserve that much given how low your odds are.”

Sinker.

“You’re too kind.” Rias drawled, playing with a strand of her hair. “Very well. Since we are playing by official Rating Game rules, then I assume that you’re bringing one of your family’s vaunted Phoenix Tears as well. Can I conclude that your Queen will be the one holding onto that priceless treasure for this bout? It would only make sense, would it not?”

There was only a second or two of silence, but it was enough for the women in the conversation to tell that Riser had not anticipated Rias go in this direction.

“… Hah! I underestimated you Rias! It appears that word of your intelligence and guile were not merely words after all!” Despite his surprise, the Noble Devil recovered quickly. “You are indeed correct. You of course know that I have no need of such resources, but the same cannot be said for my priceless Peerage. Yuballuna will indeed be in possession of a tear for today’s events. Make what you will of my generosity. In fact, I look forward to see what you can conjure from it.”

Rias smirked as she stared into the hungry and genuinely *glowing* eyes of her Peerage, who were listening in on the conversation. “For once, I do believe we are in agreement.”

“If that is all, then I believe we can conclude the preparatory meeting for tonight’s events. Until then, I bid you both a good night.” Grayfia’s monotonous voice stated the ending of the conversation, and the magic circles near Rias’ ear died off.

“I believe that we all know what to do then?” Rias asked her beloved followers.

“As much as we can.” Kiba’s smile would have been disarming had it not been for his eyes being visible for once, with a fairly evil glint to them.

“Fufu. As important as this fight will be, I can’t help but be a bit excited for it.” Akeno giggled, licking one of her fingers sensually.

“It’ll be nice to hit something that doesn’t matter for once.” Koneko flexed her fingers as she donned her fighting gloves.

“My name is Gasper. Not Dio.” Gasper hissed.

Everyone looked at the young dhampir with some concern.

“… They called you Dio.” Rias went out on a limb and poured gas on the fire with a blatant and obvious lie.

The shadows behind Gasper began to writhe and a few bats materialized in the room.

“Do you think that was a good idea?” Akeno whispered to Rias, slightly worried.

“Probably not, but we can at least fix it after the game.” Their leader felt slightly guilty about exploiting Gasper’s slightly unhinged state of mind, but this was the most motivated Gasper had ever been and they needed as many advantages as they could get.

She had no illusion about her odds. They were better than she had originally anticipated, but still not particularly good. Riser would have to play his Peerage to their advantage while they would have to hide their tricks and tactics for as long as possible if they wanted a hope of success.

She knew it, and her Peerage knew it. It was hard not to, with Issei reminding them every other hour for the past few weeks.

Despite how hungry her friends looked, she knew they were anxious as well. It made her feel like she failed them in a way. It was her job to put on a strong front and provide her family confidence.

Her eyes wandered as she picked up the cup in front of her and drained the rest of her tea. From her adorable Peerage. To the countless books on the wall.

There was a newspaper on her desk with some of the latest news from the underworld. The headline was blaring about the opening of another major building for the Ars Nova organization, a charity and rallying group for commoner and non-pure blooded related Noble Devils that want a leg up in their society.

She couldn’t blame them for the most part. She found Devil Nobility rather stifling and conceited for the most part, but they were still a necessity. At least for now. Power was Power. And blood DID matter in far more ways than the public knew. Necessary ways that kept not only their society but the three Factions themselves in check.

And here she was, the hypocrite knowingly going against all that… what would Issei say if she told him about her view on all this? About what she was doing?

It really was a coin toss with him. Either something completely useless, or enlightening. Both probably infuriating though. Then again, she wouldn’t mind the distraction now.

Her eyes landed on the newspaper again. She really envied her cousin Carnelian sometimes, to be so talented and capable that even the Bael family could rarely tell her what to do, even as a half blood that was only recently taken back into the fold. A rarity if there ever was one.

Before her mind could wander further, a knock on the door to the room announced the arrival of Sona and Tsubaki. “Rias. We have arrived to facilitate tonight’s Rating Game to the observers.”

“Right on time.” Rias smiled and welcomed her friend in. “Would you like some tea? Akeno has a pot brewing as we speak.”

“Please.” Sona made her way for a vacant chair and sat down. Much to her credit, she only spared the agitated Gasper a few seconds of her curious attention before focusing on her friend again. “I take it these past few weeks have been productive.”

The host laughed. This was as close as Sona would ever get to asking if she was okay and confident about today’s events. “You could say that. We’ve certainly learned a great deal, that much is guaranteed. Most of which is not particularly becoming of those of our position, but useful none the less.”

“I shudder to imagine what it must have been like.” Despite her completely lackluster tone, they all knew that Sona genuinely meant it.

“It was, an experience. I’ll admit that much.” Rias laughed sheepishly while avoiding eye contact. “But we did make some great strides of progress. I can confidently say that we’ve come farther than we expected during our recess.”

“I should hope so. The student body is nearly up in arms with your absence. And that’s with the spells on campus trying to hide it.” Sona shook her head. “And? What about the currently second largest headache in Kuoh right now?”

Normally Issei was the first, but even Sona had to admit that Riser was a bigger pain for everyone for the time being.

For a moment, Rias’ peerage sobered and looked uncomfortable, but they immediately reverted afterwards. “He’s at home, resting. You know how neurotic he can be at times. Three weeks supervising us was enough to even wear him down.”

Three weeks of training. Three weeks of incessantly picking them apart and building up the habits they needed to win.

Three weeks outside of his *den*. The place he had been holed up in nearly perpetually for five years.

It had not been pretty.

Sona picked up that something was amiss, but held her tongue. It wasn’t her place to probe into the matter, and she had more important tasks that required her attention. “I see. Well, so long as he doesn’t cause any issues, I suppose that is for the best. It’s a pity. I was starting to enjoy the peace and quiet again too.”

Rias pouted. “Well that’s simply mean. How could you Sona? I thought we were friends.”

The wait was over. The training was over. It was time to put what they learned to application.

“At the very least, I thought you would give us the chance to stir things up first before Issei got going again.”

It was time for them to have their fun.

o. o. o.

The Rating Game had started.

Much to Rias’ quiet delight, the battleground was a perfect replica of the Kuoh school grounds save for the ethereal green aurora that took up half of the twilight night sky. Familiar territory. It was another factor that played to her advantage, albeit only slightly. She started in the ORC clubhouse on the far side of the campus while Riser’s started in the main school’s Principal office.

Her initial steps were fairly expected and straightforward. The clubhouse was surrounded by the equivalent of a small forest, so she and her Peerage began to set up loads of traps everywhere.

However, what caught the spectators’ eyes the most were the bats that flew all over the place, and the peculiar cardboard boxes with eyeholes that the teens made an effort to set up and position around the battlegrounds.

o. o. o.

Marion, Burent, Shuriya, two maids and an Indian belly dancer, all scoffed as they disabled another of the traps leading up to Rias’ clubhouse. Just like in chess, Pawns had the ability to upgrade themselves when in recognized enemy territory. It was a common tactic in Rating Games to try and get as many in there as possible to overwhelm their enemies with a small army of Queen powered soldiers.

Sadly for Gremory, she had no Pawns in her Peerage as of yet, so this benefit was not available to her. Another reason for many to doubt her odds of success.

“Is this the best they can do?” Marion shook her head. “It’s not like they’re even trying.”

“Well what do you expect? We are dealing with children, and they’re new to this.” Shuriya shrugged. “We’re essentially popping their Rating Game cherries.”

“Speaking of popping cherries, I call dibs on that cute blonde of Gremory’s when this is all over.” Burent smirked.

“I’m pretty sure that Karlamine already called him.” Shuriya shamelessly shot down her fellow pawn’s hopes.

“Not that blonde, the other one.”

“Seriously? You want tiny thing?” The belly dancer did a double take. “I’ll never understand your tastes. I don’t know how Marion puts up with you.”

“Please. Marion’s a bigger deviant than I am. She’s probably going to try and sneak off with that white haired brat when everyone’s back is turned.” Burent laughed.

She stopped laughing however when her passive insult was met with silence.

“Marion?”

“Move!” Shuriya pushed her comrade out of the way just before she was skewered by a dull green and brown sword that seemed to blend in with the surroundings. Without thinking, both pawns unleashed a small salvo of magic spells at their attacker and made some distance for safety.

It was only after things calmed down that they noticed that their fellow Pawn and maid Burent was on the ground further back and fading away into light particles.

*“Riser Phoenix. One Pawn retired.”* Grayfia’s emotionless voice stated across the school grounds.

“How disappointing. I had hoped to get at least two of you before I was found out. Looks like I need more practice at this sneaking thing.” Kiba seemed to melt out from the background of brown and green without a sound, waving about a seemingly uninspiring sword.

While normally he could only make weapons with one ability at a time, he had managed to learn how to produce multifunctional ones over the break so long as their powers weren’t too radical, though it still did take him some time to fabricate them properly.

This one in particular was simple enough. All it did was mask the sound of his footsteps and change his body colors to a mix of brown and green to match a forest background, similar to army camo. Strength wise, it wasn’t much different than most other generic swords he could make.

Compared to flashy flaming swords, and swords that could eat light energy, this one was admittedly far simpler in theory to make.

He wasn’t much for naming things, but Issei had dubbed it “Sherwood” when he first saw it, clearly referring to Robin Hood lore. And, he had to admit, the name fit.

“Tch. At least it looks like Gremory’s group isn’t shying away from a fight.” Shuriya cursed as she prepared her demonic energy for a spell.

Burent was about to voice her agreement when Kiba rushed in at them with a sword in one hand, and his other hand about to lash out…

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*“This isn’t a fair fight, so don’t bother to fight fair!” Issei stood in front of Rias’ peerage.*

*Rias’ blinded and slightly concussed Peerage.*

*“You see this!?” He held up the flashlight that he had both blinded and beaned them with just moments earlier. “Of course you don’t! Because that’s the point! Fuck swords, spells, and shields! I beat you fools with a toy I got on fucking Amazon! Unless you are dealing with something without eyes or radiating enough power that you can’t even get close to it, don’t bother with anything else other than going for the cheap shots!”*

*“You want us to blind them?” Koneko groaned.*

*“Blind them. Deafen them. Distract them. Shove shit up their nose or dirt in their eyes for all I care. You are out manned and out gunned. If you want a hope of winning, you are going to fight cheap, efficiently, and like an asshole to either stop them from hitting you or to open them up for a quick and easy kill.”*

*“So like you.” Kiba grunted.*

*“Do you want me to take out my cell phone for me to prove my point again?”*

*No one dared to say otherwise and provoke him.*

*“That’s what I thought.”*

*“Stun-lock tactics.” Gasper seemed to have an epiphany. “That’s what you want us to master. That… could work. That actually could work between all of us if we do it right, but won’t that take too long? Only Akeno-san can make light that bright with her powers.”*

*Issei face palmed. “You guys haven’t gotten it yet?”*

*He casually waved the flashlight in his hands and casually swung it.*

*… He then paused momentarily to make sure that his audience was capable of actually seeing what he was doing, waited a few more seconds for Gasper to stop rubbing his eyes, and then shook it again.*

*“What does this look like to you?”*

o. o. o.

A second blade, a dagger really, formed in his off-hand instantly as he swiped it at the two women far before he was in range.

The weapon itself was nothing special in design normally, but when powered by just a bit of energy the top centimeter of the blade lit up with the intensity of over a thousand lumens, which was the rough equivalent of the lights used at shipping yards to light up the entire area.

And he just blasted that intense light right into two pairs of eyes at close range.

“GHAAAAAAAA-ACK!?”

He dropped the two before they could finish screaming.

o. o. o.

*“Riser Phoenix. Two Pawns retired.”*

“What the heck are these guys thinking?” Ile muttered as she poked a box that was inside the gymnasium with her chainsaw. “Do they think they’re scaring us with these things?”

“I don’t know.” Nel, Ile’s twin sister, shrugged. “Those boxes look like an even cheaper attempt at a ghost costume than those stereotypical do it at home white sheet ones that you see on tv shows.”

“Well Mira? You may be the weakest out of us, but your magic ability is still higher than ours. Is it a trap?” Xuelian, one of Riser’s rooks all but demanded.

“It’s a trap, but I’m not sure why or how.” Mira, the third Pawn in the gym frowned in confusion as she looked at the underside of a second box. “There’s a teleportation sigil on the inside of this thing with Gremory’s insignia, so obviously at least one of them is using them to jump around the battlefield, but there has to be more to it than that. The sigil is different. More complex than a normal one, but I can’t figure out how exactly. We’d be able to sense them being used the moment they warped too.”

“Maybe one of them has some sort of Sacred Gear that hides them?” Nel suggested.

“Who knows?” Ila shrugged. “I just want someone to show up already so we can get this over with. Really. There’s what, five of them? This entire game is just embarrassing.”

“I agree.”

The three Pawns and Rook paused and turned to see Koneko walking in the front door while flexing her fingers.

“Oh? Gremory must be confident if she only sent one of you here.” Xuelian stepped forward. “That or desperate. I am Xuelian! Rook of Riser Phoenix!”

“Nel!”

“And Ila!” The chainsaw wielding twins jumped at the ready. “Riser-sama’s Pawns!”

“And I am Mira! Also a Pawn!”

“I’m a Rook. And you’re all idiots.” The Nekosho made a fist and took a stance. “President isn’t confident or desperate. She just feels pity for you.”

Xuelian scowled. “She what?!”

Before any further words were said, Koneko darted forward at Xuelan and reached behind her back…

o. o. o.

*“Hey Man Slave. Can you toss me that flashlight dagger of yours for a sec?” Issei asked casually soon after Rias and her crew regained use of their eyeballs again.*

*Kiba looked like he wanted to use said dagger for something far more violent, but held his tongue and tossed it at Issei.*

*In spite of several of their silent hopes that their infuriating tutor would cut himself by the surprise action, Issei caught the weapon without issue and began to inspect it with a curious eye, from blade to hilt, as though he was a curator.*

*And then he pointed it straight at Kiba and lit it up, blinding the poor unfortunate teen again without any warning or shame.*

*“GAH?! THE HELL HYOUDOU?!”Kiba recoiled as he grasped at his skull and curled into a ball while letting loose a string of curses.*

*“What are you talking about?” Issei casually asked in a faux innocent tone as he tossed the offending tool to Gasper who desperately juggled the sharp tool in a desperate attempt to catch it without cutting himself. “I don’t have the dagger. Dio does. I’m clearly not at fault.”*

*“That’s stupid even for you.” Koneko frowned. “We all saw you blast it in Kiba’s eyes.”*

*“That’s hearsay. All your eyes are clearly still messed up. Dio has the dagger. What’s the logic that says that he wasn’t the one that gave Man Slave the facial?”*

*“Stop being ridiculous Issei.” Rias sighed. “By that logic, anyone could have blinded Kiba if they… had the… dagger…”*

*She and the rest of the peerage went quiet as her words and Issei’s off the cuff lesson sunk in.*

*“… Couldn’t you have just TOLD us instead of blinding me you asshole?” Kiba growled.*

*“But I didn’t blind you. Dio did.”*

*“I’m Gasper! And stop dragging me into things whenever you piss someone else off!”*

*“So help me I am going to skewer you by the end of this Hyoudou.”*

o. o. o.

From behind her back, Koneko swung the dagger that Kiba had made for her at the beginning of the Rating Game and channeled her demonic energy into it.

The blade of the dagger lit up with the brightness equivalent to a shipyard floodlight of over a thousand lumens.

Right into all the eyes of all four members of Riser’s Peerage.

“GHAAAAAA?!” All four girls screamed in surprise and absolute agony as their corneas dilated so harshly and painfully that they were immediately blinded for the foreseeable future.

She didn’t pity them. Their misery would be treated by the end of the night.

The diminutive girl immediately got within the guard of Riser’s Rook. She clenched a fist.

Crack!

And low kicked the woman’s knee with ki to enforce her strength, all but destroying the joint.

“AAAAAAA-GAK?!” Her scream of pain was cut short as Koneko followed through with a haymaker to the left side of the jaw, breaking it and jolting the skull hard enough for an instant concussion.

The Chinese dressed woman faded into light before she hit the ground.

*“Riser Phoenix’s Rook-”*

Koneko didn’t bother to pay attention to Grayfia’s announcement as she charged at the three still stunned Pawns in front of her like a mad bull. She had to be ruthless if she wanted to minimize the time and effort needed to take them out.

She held back a scowl as she snapped one of the twins’ chainsaws in half as she punched right through it in order to all but impale the girl’s larynx with her fist, then immediately followed through with a kick that knocked her into her sister. She then turned to charge the staff user, grabbed the weapon, and then elbowed her hard enough to crack a few ribs.

As she proceeded to tear the girls apart, figuratively and literally, she couldn’t help but hold back some annoyance. She was used to breaking bodies, not literally destroying their limbs and potentially crippling them.

She then remembered that two of them were about to use chainsaws on her and her minor sense of guilt decided to hide in a corner for being an idiot.

*“Riser Phoenix. Three Pawns retired.”*

Koneko panted slightly as her opponents, no, victims disappeared. Even with her training, she was more of an endurance fighter, not a speed fighter. Catching all four of them while they were still blinded and crippled took more effort and stamina than she would have liked.

“Riser-sama. The Rook. Dagger. Blinding light…” One of the twins gasped as she vanished, no doubt sending a final message to the rest of the Peerage in her final moments.

Koneko hands tightened into fists and she clicked her tongue in annoyance before making her way out of the building. She had screwed up this early in the Rating Game and now it was only going to get harder for everyone else.

She needed to hit something again.

*“Koneko. How are you doing? You’re still in the Gym.”* Rias’ voice asked with some concern, a small bit of spellwork acting as a short ranged transceiver in her ear.

“I’m good. Just got caught up in my thoughts for a moment.” Koneko shook her head and cleared her mind. She glanced at the dagger Kiba gave her and noticed that it was falling apart in real time. The tool was useful, but most of Kiba’s weapons tended to break after a couple of uses in anyone else’s hands. The more powerful they were, the faster they broke. “I used my dagger in the fight, but it took me some time to get rid of all my targets. One managed to warn the others that I blinded them before I could knock her out of the fight.”

*“Unfortunate, but not unexpected.”* Rias sighed. *“Fortunately, they’ll only think that you have the knives for now. Meet up with Kiba to get another-”*

*“Koneko! Get out of there! Secondary Target’s moving and almost on top of you!!”* Gasper’s panicked voice cut through the conversation and might as well had stabbed the Rook in the stomach.

She took off in a sprint across the sports field, and just barely noticed the small pillar of magical circles come down right on top of her.

Her heart beat heavily and time seemed to slow down as the attack came down on her head.

Though if one paid attention at the last second, they would notice that the spell seemed to slow down just a bit...

BOOM!

The Nekoshou hissed in pain as she was launched from the explosion that went off just behind where she was. She was still able to fight, but her clothes had been torn to the point that her modesty was barely protected, and the burns on her skin didn’t help matters either.

“Hoh? I could have sworn that would have hit. You must be quite the lucky girl.” A sultry and mature voice mocked from above. “Well, then again, I doubt not being taken out quickly could be considered lucky.”

Koneko looked up to see Yuballuna, Riser’s Queen, point her magic staff at her, already charging for another attack.

However before she was forced to defend again, the Queen was distracted by something nearby, and lifted her tool to erect a defensive magical barrier to block a bolt of lightning that crashed right into it an instant later.

“Now now. Not to belittle our adorable Koneko-chan, but wouldn’t you prefer to spend time with someone more interesting? Bomb Queen?” Akeno smiled in a way that didn’t fool anyone, radiating with a malicious electrical power as she gently flew closer.

“Oh? Gremory’s vaunted Priestess of Thunder. I was wondering when you’d appear.” Yuballuna also began to gather demonic energy.

*“The Rest of Riser’s Peerage is starting to come out. I think she’s trying to stall Akeno-san. Someone’s going to be overwhelmed at this rate.”* Gasper relayed to everyone what he was seeing through the countless bats he had spread throughout the battlegrounds.

Rias frowned. *“This was bound to happen. We took out too many of his pieces too quickly without incurring any losses by playing strategically. He’s going to overwhelm us with numbers while he still has them. It’s crude, but the best play he can make.”*

A dry smile made its way on her face as she stood up. Had she not been tutored by a certain crude and ruthless individual earlier, she might have been worried or caught off guard by this turn of events. She might have even done something vain and reckless like try and take on Riser herself while the others were playing decoys.

But she didn’t.

*“I’m moving out. Kiba, stall and distract as many as you can. Put up a good performance. Gasper support whoever you believe needs the most help. Akeno and Koneko will do what they feel is right. And remember…”*

Rias’ smile widened just a tad bit more than normal as she walked out of the main office of the clubhouse.

*“Have fun.”*

Every single member of her peerage allowed themselves to chuckle slightly as they prepared themselves for the ordeals ahead. *“Right.”*

o. o. o.

“So what do you think so far?” Serafall watched the Rating Game unfold, taking note of Kiba challenging one of Riser’s knight’s to a duel.

“I think that Sirzech’s crying on the inside from watching his adorable sister take too well to Issei’s tactics.” Falbium snorted. “That cheap trick with the flashlight daggers has his name written all over them.”

“That’s always been his modus operandi though, hasn’t it?” Michael watched as Akeno exchanged magic with Yuballuna. “The majority of his tactics usually boiled down to either quick and efficient means of opening up an opponent’s defenses, and quick and efficient means of taking down his opponents in general. So much so that he rarely incorporated actual “fighting” into the equation.”

“Mmm. Say what you want about the kid, but he never did like fighting itself.” Azazel agreed as he observed the current setup of the battlefield, and snapped his fingers as Riser’s remaining pawns and one of his Bishops ignored Kiba’s fight and went into the forest where the clubhouse was. “Ah. I get it now. Gremory’s Knight asked for the duel to put on a show. He could have easily pulled out one of those daggers by now for a cheap win by now if he wanted but he wouldn’t be able to take out that many against those numbers.”

“And the boxes?” Serafall probed. “I’m guessing there’s some gimmick to them.”

“Probably magically insulants. You know, the boxes that you smuggle stuff across security with.” Azazel shrugged. “As for how that Bishop can still manage to teleport into them, I’m guessing that the teleportation circle’s part of a closed loop system. One circle that technically exists in multiple places at once, using causality to bypass the insulation.”

“Clever. I was going to guess he was using some multi box variant of the Schrödinger principle.” Falbium nodded in comprehension. “On a side note, I’ll have to make our guards keep an eye out for that spell setup in the future.”

“Have fun.” Azazel waved him off lazily.

“Is Ajuka not going to join in on today’s events?” Michael probed.

“He’s still hunting for his brother and fellow conspirators.” Serafall lamented. “After he disowned Diodora from the Astaroth family, he’s been under heavy scrutiny from all sides. If he wasn’t as powerful and influential as he was, he might have even been at risking his position right now.

There was a brief silence in the room before they all burst out laughing.

If there was one member of the Maou that wasn’t going anytime soon, it was Ajuka. And not for a lack of trying either. Especially after the shit that was pulled on them five years ago.

Still, that didn’t mean that he could do whatever he wanted. Just the opposite in fact.

“Sirzech’s sister isn’t afraid to get her hands dirty early.” Falbium nodded in approval as he spied her moving out of the ORC clubhouse towards the fighting. “Not sure if this decision was her idea to begin with or something Issei ingrained into her, but it’s the right move to make so long as she prepared properly to take them out fast.”

“Still, the odds don’t look good. They’re bound to get overwhelmed eventually if they aren’t careful.” Serafall sighed as she switched between screens. “And that isn’t even taking into account the real elephant in the room.”

“You’re speaking about Riser Phoenix himself.” Michael clarified, and while his benevolent tone had not changed in the slightest, the others in the conversation knew better than to assume as such.

That child still had much to answer for.

“Who else would I be talking about?” Serafall likewise didn’t change her demeanor, though her eyes grew slightly colder.

“I’m almost impressed in a way.” Falbium yawned. “Five years, and that boy’s barely managed to bring any attention to himself outside of his station and some Rating Game victories. Given his personality, you’d think he would have stuck out more. He’s played his role quite well. More of a dog than a bird at this point.”

“You think he’s hiding something worthwhile?” Azazel hummed curiously. “Mmm. Then again, despite being a member of Issei’s inner circle back then, he was always particularly unimpressive compared to everyone else. Jasmine. Carnelian. Kuroka. Vali. They all perpetually outshone him to the point that he was almost a side note.”

“That’s a rather cruel observation.” Michael chuckled, not at all denying or chastising his brother’s comment.

“You might be right, but like Azazel said, he was once a part of Issei’s circle.” Falbium stated, his tone slightly harder. “And since when has anyone ever gotten that close to the kid and not benefitted from it in some way?”

No one bothered to reply. It was a rhetorical question that they all knew the answer to.

o. o. o.

Riser’s remaining Pawns and his Bishop, Ni, Li, and Mihane, dashed through the forest straight for the ORC clubhouse.

Thanks to the efforts of the pawns that came before them, the traps set up earlier by Rias’ peerage had been removed, allowing them a clear path straight to their goal.

One of two things would happen. Either they would make it to the clubhouse without any resistance, allowing Ni and Li to promote to Queens, or they would encounter Rias and fight her in a three on one battle. Or a three on two battle if her Bishop was nearby. Either way, they’d be drastically weakening their primary target for the final battle.

“Stay close.” Mihane ordered, her powers primed to cast a spell at a moment’s notice in case they encountered any remaining traps. After how quickly their comrades had been wiped out, she had already enshrouded them in defensive enchantments that could take the brunt of most surprise assaults reliably. The first strikes at least.

They could see the ORC building just a short distance away now. “If Gremory was to do something about our approach, it would be now.”

So focused on any magical and dangerous looking traps, she completely missed the cardboard box half hidden in some bushes nearby…

“Now now. I feel I’m being underestimated.” Rias surprised the three by revealing herself, floating down from the canopy with her wings extended. “Do you really think I need help to take out a pair of Pawns and a Bishop?”

“Don’t underestimate us Nya.” Ni smirked, taking a stance.

“We’re stronger than the rest of those other girls.” Li mimicked her sister.

They weren’t kidding either. The two Nekomata girls weren’t Nekoshou like Koneko or Kuroka, but they were adept Ki users.

And with Mihane’s support magic, the two nimble Pawns essentially had the physical prowess of a Queen piece even without promoting themselves. It wouldn’t be too far off to say that the pair were among Riser’s strongest cards to play despite being mere Pawn pieces.

Of course, Rias didn’t know this. But even if she did, the confident smile on her face would not have changed at all.

“How adorable.” The Crimson Ruin Princess sighed aridly as she slowly lowered herself to the ground and manifested a black and red orb in her hand. With every passing second she gathered more power, prompting, no, demanding that all attention be on her. “Riser’s girls think they can play with me. What should we do first? Tag? Catch? Oh…”

A short distance away, two holes in a cardboard box glowed a faint red.

“How about *ball*?”

Rias really didn’t need help to take out a pair of Pawns and a Bishop, but the extra help certainly made things easier.

o. o. o.

*“Dio. Man Slave. You two are the sole reasons why the lot of you have a hope of winning this mess in the first place.”*

*“M’not Dio…”*

*“So help me Hyoudou, if this is another attempt to get my guard down so you’ll blind me again I will stab you in your sleep.”*

*“First, I’ve already reached my quota for the day. Second, greater scrubs than you have tried. All have failed, and provided me much amusement in the process.” Issei crossed his arms firmly in front of the male members of the Gremory Peerage. “But we can go over your glaring weaknesses and futile dreams later. Right now, you two need to realize that you fulfil an important role that the girls can’t, and thus you actually can do something other than swing sticks and throw spells around like morons. You are the support units.”*

*“Support units?” Kiba frowned skeptically as he thought as to how he could fulfil the role. “But I’m a Knight.”*

*“You’re also the one that can pull the shiny toys from your ass that everyone’s going to use to fuck over the enemy’s ground forces.” Issei corrected. “This shit show you’re going to play in has two main stages. Getting rid of the minions, and getting rid of the boss. Both have different requirements, and both require different tactics. What works for one won’t do nearly as well for the other.”*

*He pointed to Kiba. “You, Man Slave, are responsible for providing the means to boost your teammate’s overall combat ability and versatility. An indirect buffer. The better you are at making your temporary equipment, the easier it will be for everyone else to fight without wasting time and energy.”*

*He then pointed to Gasper. “You Dio, are the pinch hitter. The hidden Ace. The emergency red button. The absolute debuffer. You can stop fucking time and there’s not a damn thing anyone can do about it so long as they don’t know you’re there. If shit looks bad, your job is to give whoever is there the opening they need to turn things around for a win, or to end fights for your team before they can even start. And since you aren’t going to fight, stick to more support. You’re learning to make bats, right? Well make more then. Flood the field and be the eyes the Weeb needs to plan properly. You don’t have numbers to win, and you sure as hell don’t have the raw power to brute force it, so the least you guys can do is have the info to pull something out of your asses.”*

*Gasper shifted uncomfortably. “That, sounds good, but how am I going to learn how to make bats that quickly? I’m working from scratch and I don’t know how to manipulate my powers that well.”*

*Issei nodded. “I figured. Fortunately, I conveniently do know the basics on how to use darkness based powers.”*

*“Through porn?” Kiba asked dryly.*

*“No. Actually through meeting a Greater Eldritch Outer God in my sleep by accident when I was ten.”*

*“…”*

*“…”*

*“I could never see the color pink the same way again after that mess. Crabby old bat.”*

*Much to Kiba’s and Gasper’s surprise, Issei suddenly hissed in pain and grabbed his head before shouting at the sky. “For fucks sake Grandma, I wasn’t even thinking of your stupid name that time! Find something better to do!”*

*“… What?”*

*The Sekiryuutei shook his head and rubbed his temples tenderly. “Word of advice? Don’t interact with Gods if you can help it. They’re more trouble than I am, if that’s possible. And they’re assholes.”*

*The two Devils didn’t say anything. They agreed that silence was the best route they had to ensure that things didn’t get weirder than usual.*

*Ignoring their dilemma, Issei took out some paperwork and handed it to the very confused and unnerved Devils. “I’ve made a list and some general directions on what you two should focus on and how to do it. Man Slave should be able to figure out most of it by himself, but Dio might need some help getting a hold of imitating the miracle of “Inverting Absence” in order to make this bats from darkness. Normally it would take a while for someone to get a hang of it, but I’m pretty sure you have enough of an affinity for being a vampire overlord to at least master making just bats for now.”*

*Kiba and Gasper came out of those three weeks with more questions than answers. Fortunately, they both agreed that most of the many new questions they had were ones that they didn’t want or need to be resolved. Ever.*

*And that was before Issei took out the stack of advanced magic theory on top of a larger stack of cardboard boxes. “Of course, you’ll be doing that when you’re not practicing concordant-based spatial manipulation theory and spells.”*

 *“… What?” Gasper squeaked, for once not out of fear of something insane, but out of something far too sane for him to handle.*

*Fortunately for the young boy, his years of experience with binge gaming came in handy when it came to his weeks of binge studying and magic practice.*

o. o. o.

A massive explosion erupted from the forest in the distance.

*“Riser Phoenix. Two Pawns and one Bishop. Retired.”*

“Hmmm.”

“It appears that Gremory’s more capable than we had anticipated, Brother.”

Riser glanced at the lone member of his Peerage that had yet to leave his side. His Bishop and little sister, Ravel Phoenix. “Indeed. My bride to be is not as impulsive as we’d believe. And yet she is quite audacious. Despite how this game started, she clearly intends to fight me with her Peerage behind her.”

They had expected Rias to sneak into the building by now under the chaos and challenge him directly, but that had not been the case.

“At this point, regardless of the outcome, it will not look good for you.” Ravel sighed. “You have yet to defeat a single member of her Peerage while we are down by over half now. Even if the goal was to wear her forces down, this rate of defeat is embarrassing.”

“I suppose I have coddled her enough as is.” Riser agreed, standing up. “As crude as it may have been, attacking her base with all of us at once from the start may have been the best tactic to employ. However, even if we do that now, there are no more Pawns left to exploit the fruits of such a tactic.”

“I’m more curious as to how the bulk of Gremory’s Peerage has managed to take down groups of our own with such little resistance individually.” Ravel hummed curiously. “So far, only the ones that have fought her Rook managed to tell us about her tactics before being defeated. A dagger that blinds her opponents quickly. Quite an unexpectedly dirty tactic if I say so myself. Especially from a Rook.”

“A Rook… come to think of it, if Riser recalls correctly, Gremory’s Bishop is still unaccounted for.”

Ravel snapped her fingers. “That’s probably how they are doing it. Gremory’s Bishop is likely a powerful support type that’s hiding and moving between fights. They’re the key to her strategy, but the fact that we haven’t seen them yet means that they aren’t good at fighting directly.”

“We have our target then.” Riser stood up and rolled his shoulders.

“You’re going as well?”

“If Riser doesn’t move now what sort of message would that send to our audience?” He asked with a tone that was far less pompous than what most would expect. “Either one of us should be able to flush out the worm should we put on enough pressure. Speaking of which…”

He mentally reached out to his remaining Peerage members and made a quick tally on who was where. Yuballuna was fighting Rias’ Queen in an aerial magic battle while the Rook provided meager support on the ground by chucking debris as interference. And Gremory’s Knight was stuck in a one on one fight with Karlamine with Isabella and Sirius spectating.

“… They’re stalling.” Riser clicked his tongue in annoyance. The bulk of his Peerage had been taken out so quickly that they had barely managed to get any word back to him about what happened, and yet now there were two seemingly even stalemates happening simultaneously.

Time wasn’t on their side. The more they played around, the more he’d look like a fool and lose ground. “Ravel, support Yuballuna. My intended knows she has Phoenix Tears, but they don’t know about your specialty.”

“And I suppose you’ll go out and make such a fool of yourself that you can’t be ignored, focusing all attention on you?” His sister eyed him warily.

Riser’s lips twitched bitterly, knowing exactly what she was insinuating. “What better way to make myself known?”

o. o. o.

Karlamine was getting frustrated as she dueled with Rias’ Knight. It wasn’t an unsatisfactory duel. Not at all. Her opponent was keeping up with her wonderfully as they blitzed one another at speeds that no member of either Peerage could match, and his technique was refined that truly underscored his proficiency with the blade.

Both of them sported cuts and in his case burns from her flaming sword, proof of their attempts to put the other down. However, it felt like neither one of them were making any significant ground despite the effort she was putting in.

She had destroyed his sword several times over already thanks to the properties of her flaming blade, however his frustrating Sacred Gear enabled him to make another one in an instant. Despite seemingly constantly putting him on the back foot, she could tell that it didn’t bother him in the slightest. No, rather, this entire duel didn’t seem to matter to him if the cold glint in his eyes was any indication.

“Is he taking this seriously?”

*“Isabella. Sirius. Karlamine. Stop playing around. Take out Gremory’s Knight together.”*

To Kiba’s credit, the look of surprise, indignation, and slight insult on Karlamine’s face moments before he was beset upon by Sirius and Isabella from behind was all he needed to figure out that he had run out of time before barely managing to disengage and escape in time.

“So someone finally caught on, huh?” Rias’ Knight smirked bitterly as he held his sword with his dominant hand while materializing a second seemingly identical blade in the other.

“So you were stalling.” Karlamine snarled, the flames on her own weapon growing in intensity. “I will gut you for your slander.”

“Save some for us.” Sirius, Riser’s other Knight brandished her Zweihander while the masked Rook Isabella took a stance.

Kiba smirked and pointed his second sword at the girls who were focused completely on him. “I’d like to see you try.”

Isabella probably would have said something about how cocky Kiba was being. Karlamine would have just gotten pissed, and Sirius would have prepared to attack.

They would have. Unfortunately, Kiba’s new sword pointed right at them had made that difficult when it lit up like a literal floodlight and viciously blinded them without mercy.

The shock and pain were so great that it took the three a few seconds to even realize that their eyes and skulls had even been assaulted in the first place, and afterwards their senses were so overwhelmed that they could only scream incoherently in absolute agony, unable to form the correct thoughts or words to express what they were feeling.

The girls had not even stopped screaming before Kiba was on top of Karlamine and ran her through with his original blade.

“B-Bastard…”

“I truly am sorry for how this turned out, but this entire Rating Game is a sham, and I have something more important than my pride to lose should I fail.” He whispered in her ear, not knowing if she even heard him in her current state. “Perhaps another time, we can have the duel you wish for and rightfully deserve. But not today.”

“Karlamine!!”

Much to Kiba’s surprise, he had to disengage in order to avoid the meteoric assault that came at him from behind in the form of Isabella.

“She can see me?” He frowned as the Rook took a stance while trying to protect the Knight that was already starting to fall apart into blue wisps of energy, indicating that she was being taken out of the game.

It was only then that he remembered that she was wearing a half mask. Damn. Guess that thing isn’t a decoration after all. He had been hoping to get at least the other Knight while they were blinded.

*“Kiba! RUN!!!”* From out of nowhere, Gasper’s voice shouted into his ear frantically in a tone that left no time for questions of context.

It was almost a universal instinct for all forms of mobile life. Whenever anyone or anything screamed out that lone word with THAT much fear in it, the first and last thing on anyone’s mind would and should be to stop everything else that was being done and get the hell out of there by any means possible. Kiba was no exception.

He turned to run, and it was only then that he *felt* it.

With his enhanced speed, he made it three steps before he saw the colors of everything around him begin to turn red, warping the world he thought he knew into a completely different setting.

*“Riser Phoenix’s Knight. Ret-”*

BOOM!!!

Somehow, he made it halfway across the field before the world exploded, and he was flung into a nearby sports shed. Fortunately it wasn’t enough to take him out of the game. Unfortunately, it still hurt like hell.

“Hoooh? How interesting.” Riser hovered down from the sky with flaming wings, embers of his attack littering the ground with rich orange tongues flickered around his outstretched hand. “It appears I had underestimated my betrothed. Her Bishop wasn’t the only one with interesting tricks. A Knight that makes tools to blind opponents. How resourceful, in a pedestrian way. No wonder why so many of mine were disposed of so easily. That dagger used by the Rook earlier was no doubt another of your products.”

The King turned to another building and spied the seemingly innocent cardboard box on top of it.

It was like a bolt of lightning struck him. The sort that many would scream “eureka!” once hit, only this blow did nothing but twist his insides and saturate his very being with dread.

The only visible indication that something was amiss with Riser was his twitching eyebrow as he pointed his hand at the anomaly. “A cardboard box as well… Riser suspected something was frustratingly familiar.”

A massive plume of scathing fire scorched the sky as it traveled to its target, however this time he noticed it visibly slow down significantly before it hit and devastated not just the rooftop, but the entire building itself.

Five seconds. Ten seconds. Yet Grayfia’s voice was not heard.

“Tch.” He clicked his tongue and looked down at the ground again. Gremory’s Knight was no longer visible. *“Ravel, Yuballuna. Be careful. Gremory’s Bishop is capable of slowing down time, and her Knight was the one that made the blinding dagger that the Rook used. Odds are that everyone in the peerage is armed.”*

*“Time manipulation? So that’s how the Rook escaped my spell earlier. I thought something off had happened when I attacked. What an exotic power they have in their pocket.”* Yuballuna replied, albeit with a notably bitter tone.

*“Hoh? How annoyingly resourceful.”* Ravel hummed across the line, uttering similar words to what he said himself just a short while ago. *“Gremory’s Queen and Rook haven’t used any tools yet since we started, but we will keep it in mind. They are still quite content with fighting boorishly right now, albeit frustratingly so.”*

Riser frowned as his eyes darted around the world around him, waiting for an ambush or trap. He made certain that he kept the conversation strictly to mental communication in case he was being watched or listened on. He could see and hear large flashes and explosions in the distance. *“Are you having trouble?”*

*“Some.”* Ravel admitted with reluctance. *“Gremory’s peerage is unexpectedly mad at times. Almost desperately so. But it is still manageable for now. We’ve had the advantage since before I even arrived here.”*

Mad tactics and unexpected maneuvers? While he was glad that at least one front was in his favor, he was still liking this entire Rating Game less and less by the second. *“Don’t let down your guard. The Bishop is hiding in cardboard boxes of all things.”*

*“Cardboard… boxes?”* Ravel let the words sink in. And they sunk deep. Most Devils would find the fact bizarre, insulting, or hilarious. For them though, it carried another series of emotions and meanings.

*“I suspect… I suspect that they were taught some of the Sekiryuutei’s tactics.”*

The connection was dead silent as his words sunk in. Riser didn’t blame them. He would have reacted the same.

*“… Do you think Sirzechs would do that? To bring up Issei again, after all this time?”* Ravel’s previous confidence was nowhere to be found. If anything, she sounded genuinely hurt.

*“This battle essentially has his sister’s freedom at stake. And we have done nothing but push this agenda ahead of schedule for over a year now. From Lucifer’s perspective, can we really blame him? Issei’s tactics… given the circumstances of this battle and depending on how much they learned, it could be the edge Gremory would need to Tch?!”*

*“Issei or not, it looks like they’ve stopped holding back! We might actually have to show some of our hand today brother!”* Judging from her tone, Ravel was being pushed herself somehow.

Riser clicked his tongue, knowing that talking any more might do more harm than good. *“Do what you must. We’re almost done with this charade.”*

Just a little bit more. Just a bit more until…

He looked at Sirius and Isabella, still rattled from being blinded and being so close to his attempt to take out Gremory’s Knight. He was tempted to join Yuballuna and Ravel to take out the enemy Queen and Rook at that very moment, but that would leave his beloved Knight and Rook themselves as easy prey, and there was no telling where Rias’ Bishop was, let alone Rias herself.

His eyes turned to the forest nearby.

Seconds later, entire rows of trees bordering the grounds were set aflame.

“Sirius. Isabella. Come. If you find any cardboard boxes lying about, destroy them. Gremory’s Bishop is using them to move about undetected somehow.”

“What about her Knight?” Sirius growled, still rubbing the spots from her eyes. That fool had sullied Carlamine’s honor with that farce of a duel and they would have revenge.

“He has most likely regrouped with his Master. He will appear soon enough.” His eyes narrowed. He had a Queen, a Bishop, a Knight, and a Rook left.

His opponent had exactly the same thing. Granted, they would no doubt be more worn and exhausted by this stage, but to be put on a level playing field already by an inexperienced incomplete Peerage on its first Game...

*“Oi! Bird Person! Stop sucking already and pay attention damn you! I’m trying to make you competent here!”*

“Humph. Even now the mere echoes of his mind do nothing but embarrass and infuriate me. That absurd monster...”

“Master?” Sirius looked at him confused.

“Never mind.” Riser returned to reality, casting aside his concerns. “Come. We will scour the area on our way to regroup with Yuballuna.”

o. o. o.

*“So what are we going to do during our private little one on ones?” Akeno asked sultry as she sat with Issei in the woods.*

*Issei didn’t react at all to her advances, and she had spent enough time with him to not be bothered by it anymore. Of course, if she upped her game, she’d without question get a reaction out of him. Not one she’d prefer, but it would be amusing regardless.*

*“Well, that depends on you, really.” He replied with a surprisingly helpless shrug.*

*“Pardon?” Whatever she was expecting, it wasn’t that.*

*“You’re a lightning user. And a stupidly powerful one at that.” Issei deadpanned. “Your powers are fundamentally so versatile and wide ranging that we could go off in any direction and hit paydirt eventually. Haven’t you looked up what other lightning specialist spell users do in their fights and use them as reference in your spare time?”*

*Akeno shifted uncomfortably and looked away. She was a bit flattered by his backhanded compliment of her abilities and potential, but the question about researching other lightning users lightly grazed upon a sore spot for her. She HAS done that every now and then when playing with her powers, but the problem was that more often than not, when advanced lightning theory and tactics were brought up, her father’s name would eventually appear and kill any motivation for her to further her research on whatever she was reading.*

*“Please tell me you didn’t think you could just Flash, Bang, and “Ara Ara” your way through every fight before I showed up and started to drive everyone insane.” He all but pleaded.*

*“… Not every fight.” At the very least, she felt better knowing he was fully aware of how much he frustrated everyone.*

*For once, seeing Issei despair with his face in his hands didn’t give her a warm tingly feeling.*

*“At least tell me you’re at least aware of Paracelsus’ thaumaturgic theory of magic to elemental conversion.”*

*She frowned. That, at least, she knew of. “The average ratio of elemental spells for the general Devil caster is a one to three, element to magic. This ratio dictates not only the behavior of the spell casted, but the power behind it as well. It explains why elemental spells can be blocked so easily by magical barriers and affected by other spells. The more elemental the spell’s foundation is, the harder it is to control, but the more power there is behind it.”*

*“And elemental specialists, or those with elemental dispositions are capable of controlling their spells with greater ease with less “Devil Magic”, and more of the raw respective element.” Issei concluded with a relieved nod. It was this reason why he could control his fires so comfortably despite having such low levels of magic himself. His fire breath wasn’t magic in the first place. “Have you tried playing with that theory in your spells?”*

*Altering the magic elemental composition of her lightning? Come to think of it, she did try that a few times when she first learned of the theory, but after zapping herself once a bit too hard, she gave up on it. She didn’t see the point seeing as she had so much power to begin with she could just blow away most of her targets with brute force regardless.*

*Issei shook his head in resignation before she could reply. “Judging from that look you made, no. Okay. Okay. Basics it is then.”*

*She frowned. “I don’t suppose we can do something that sounds more promising and beneficial than basics, can we?”*

*He gave her an unreadable look before sighing again. Instead of replying, he got up, walked to a nearby boulder embedded in a steep hill nearby, and slapped his hand on the side facing her before taking a few steps away. “Zap this rock if you would. Not hard, just enough to maybe make a small hole.”*

*Akeno opened her mouth to ask what he was going on about, but realized she would probably learn faster by just doing what he asked.*

*Without moving from her place, she pointed a finger at the boulder and fired her spell with a loud crack. As expected, her lightning dug into the rock with ease with minimal effort.*

*Issei nodded. “Now try that again, but make your spell as much pure element as you’re comfortable with.”*

*She faltered. “Are you sure? I was born gifted, but you know how hard it is to control pure elemental energy. I might actually hit you.”*

*“And how did that turn out last time?” He held his ground skeptically.*

*Her eyebrow twitched as she recalled said experience and the reaming she got from attacking him afterwards. She had half a mind to repeat it before thinking better of such petty actions.*

*She pointed her finger at the rock and focused. It took a bit of extra intent to convert her Devil energy into a more refined electricity than she was used to, but the spell she was using was still small, so it wasn’t too difficult.*

*Or at least, she didn’t think so until her control slipped just slightly, and the entire spell discharged instantly.*

*She gasped as the light veered to the side slightly at near instantaneous speeds, straight at Issei himself…*

*… Only to veer back on course and strike the rock with far more destructive force than the previous strike, not blowing it up, but creating large cracks that would have shattered it had it been dug out.*

*It took her another moment to realize that her spell had hit the exact spot that Issei had slapped earlier.*

*Issei wasn’t surprised in the slightest. “While the ratio of an elemental spell is three to one Devil energy, if one converted the former to raw elemental power, it should be more accurate to say along the lines of twelve to one. Devil energy fundamentally is incredibly chaotic and intent based, and while that ambiguity is phenomenally excellent for instructing spells for additional versatility, it also wastes a good portion of the potential power it possesses in that theoretical chaos. Masters of elemental magic, regardless of species, have learned how to maximize this ratio in their spells for efficiency. They can perfectly judge how much of the former they need to make it do what they want, and convert the rest of the power and then some into raw natural force. Knowing the natural physics of the element and incorporating it into their calculations can be considered the basic of basics for this process.”*

*Ah. The basics. That’s what he was getting at. She smiled sheepishly and recalled him slapping the boulder earlier. “I’m assuming you used those “basics” to ensure my spell hit the stone then. You expected me to lose control again.”*

*Come to think of it, sticking to the basics was Issei’s thing, wasn’t it? Or rather, abusing the basics in horrible ways that others didn’t expect to maximum effect. At least when it came to fighting.*

*She smiled apologetically. Not one of her usual sultry taunts, but a genuine one. “My apologies, sensei. I got ahead of myself and forgot that I was here to learn from you to begin with.”*

*He twitched, and Akeno’s smile grew slightly. Ah, she forgot, Issei was the sort that was particularly weak to those that were genuinely kind to him. It was hard to remember when he was constantly being a surly jerk, but then again that might have all been on purpose to begin with. He couldn’t handle people liking him, but he could deal with being hated, so that’s what he went with.*

*What an interesting child he was. Fufufu.*

*“What deranged shit are you thinking about this time, Yandere?”*

*Oops. She was letting her inner thoughts show on her face again.*

*“Probably nothing worse than what goes through your mind on an hourly basis.” She diverted expertly with a smile that would put most at ease, but would never fool either.*

*“I genuinely wish I could contest that. Truly, I do.” He relented with a fish eyed expression before sighing and shaking his head. “Well, thankfully you’ll be too loaded with shit to practice and study to devolve into degeneracy while I’m in spitting distance, so sucks to be you. After all raw magic theory and application’s only going to be half of what you’re working on these next few weeks.”*

*That had Akeno falter. She may be talented in the magical arts and have a large pool of power to pull from, but even she had her limits. “There’s more? I thought you were aware that even gifted and generous women like I have limits Issei. I’m still trying to get the general frequencies down for paralyzing my opponents on top of everything else.”*

*“You’ll manage. And the bulk of what we’re doing here is just basics, remember? You should be able to get a hang of it soon enough, at least with one of Man Slave’s exp boosting swords on you.” He waved her off with one hand, diverting her attention long enough to pull some items out with the other when she was distracted. “The second part of your training is going to be your hidden ace, and admittedly, something of a combo with Man Slave. It’s actually a cheap and easy trick I used myself sometimes that’s useful for some of the more versatile opponents you might come up against later. Or if you’re just facing some asshole that’s turtling behind a shield like a basic bitch.”*

*Akeno opened her mouth to argue, but paused and looked at what Issei took out. Slowly, very slowly, she comprehended where the next few weeks would take her.*

*“… Fufufu.”*

*Issei was terrible at talking to people, but she had to admit, he knew how to show a girl a good time.*

o. o. o.

Yuballuna was better than they had originally thought.

The Bomb Queen was more than her moniker had led others to believe. She was powerful to be sure, all Queens were, but the woman’s near masterful wielding of elemental wind and fire magic was something unexpected.

She stuck to explosive bomb-like spells, true to her epithet, but her use of them was a bit more diverse than anticipated, as proved when she nearly blew out Koneko’s and Akeno’s eardrums with a wide splay of loud concussive charges that shattered nearly everything glass and remotely fragile in the area.

In fact, Akeno and Koneko had to stick to communicating via their transceiver spells since then simply because they had trouble hearing anything at all anymore. The only silver lining in that situation was that their ear drums weren’t actually blown out, so their sense of balance wasn’t shot. At least yet.

But then, when the concussive rounds were proving to be less efficient, she switched to, ironically, flash bombs.

Those did work initially, however there were two minor issues with that strategy that didn’t instantly give Yuballuna the win.

The first was, simple enough, that they were fighting a ranged battle. It took time for spells and attacks to get from point A to B, and it was that time that allowed for Yuballuna’s opponents to escape.

The second was that virtually everyone in the Gremory Peerage had been so (unwillingly) conditioned with Issei blinding them with Kiba’s swords (how he kept on getting his hands on the daggers nobody knew, as Kiba swore that he made it a point to destroy all the ones he made for practice with in order to STOP Issei from torturing them), that they all could act instantly and efficiently on instinct when blinded from nowhere.

As far as Akeno and Koneko were concerned, the instant their vision went white, they BOLTED for cover and put up as many defensive measures as possible.

Afterwards, the pair both cast a set strong, yet common spells that they had all pretty much mastered by this point. One designed to heal their eyes and regain their vision. The other to prevent themselves from being blinded again.

It helped that, as bright as Yuballuna’s charges were, they weren’t as focused or intense as Kiba’s daggers. It only took them a few seconds to recover, far faster than what their opponent had expected.

However quickly they recovered unfortunately, Akeno and Koneko realized that they were still on the defensive. Their opponent’s spells were simply stronger and faster than anticipated. Enough so that mounting halfhearted counterattacks recklessly was ill advised.

Most concerning of all though was Yuballuna ability to defend against Akeno’s spells.

“Tch.” The Priestess of Thunder clicked her tongue and pointed two fingers at her opponent, charging up a high concentration of pure electricity in her spell before unleashing it with a vicious crack that surpassed anything she had unleashed before.

In theory, her boosted spell, while linear, should have enough punch to pierce through Yuballuna’s magical shield easily for some serious damage.

In actuality, the neon yellow bolt of lightning veered away from the shield just a short distance before contact, then continued to run rampant and piercing through the nearby gymnasium.

“Hoh? So you *are* dabbling with raw elemental control after all.” Yuballuna smirked at the girls. “A pity. You’re clearly still a novice, else you would have factored in just how much of a disadvantage you are against someone with the Phoenix’s blessing. Lightning is a versatile and powerful element, however it comes with so many finicky rules that the other elements can toy with it endlessly. You clearly didn’t study enough to keep that in mind.”

Akeno’s eyes widened momentarily as she realized what Yuballuna was getting at. Those of the Phoenix family were not only gifted with talent in the Fire element, but in Wind as well.

And Issei had on more than one occasion shown her just how easy it was for someone with moderate skill in the latter to be able to deflect pure lightning with a bubble of empty space. Lightning was a lazy element by nature after all. It traveled the path of least resistance, electrons jumping between molecules in large numbers to reach equilibrium. There were molecules, stepping stones in normal ambient air. There weren’t in a vacuum.

Akeno grimaced as she held a hand back and began to play with some of the hidden toys slipped into the remaining large sleeve of her haori. She was hoping to save this trick against Riser, but it appears that her opponent was too much of a threat to be frugal.

“They’re still here?” A new voice distracted all three combatants as Ravel made her appearance with flaming wings behind her. “Are you taking this seriously Yuballuna?”

“They’re more adept and durable than anticipated, Lady Ravel.” Yuballuna greeted the Bishop, dodging another strike of magical lightning in the process. “Your presence isn’t particularly needed, however it is appreciated. For a novice group, Gremory’s lot has more interesting tricks than anticipated.”

“I’ve observed.” Ravel smirked as she swayed to the side herself to avoid a large chunk of building the size of a quarter of a classroom chucked at her by Koneko. “Their tactics worked well on our more recent members, but for those of us that have a bit more experience, it’s more entertaining than anything.”

“Pity we’re not here for pleasure.” Yuballuna pointed her wand at Akeno and drifting to Ravel. “Shall we?”

Ravel nodded, mimicking the Queen with a hand and gathering up power. “Lets.”

Akeno, realizing the danger signs far faster than her underclassman, grabbed Koneko and made to retreat as fast as possible while raising as many shields as she could. *“Koneko! Run!!”*

Wind and fire rapidly gathered and condensed around them, and within moments a charge, no, a ballistic missile level payload launched at the pair and detonated with absurd force that seemed to blow away anything and everything nearby. The only reason why it hadn’t been larger was probably for the simple reason that the casters were too close to risk getting caught in their own spell.

BOOM!

“Aaaah!” It wasn’t a direct hit, but by all rights it didn’t need to be. The spell’s explosion was strong enough to launch the pair viciously. Had they not had Rook level durability, it would have probably kicked them out of the Rating Game right then and there.

Instead they were scratched up, bruised, and most notably, borderline naked save for a few scraps of clothing that hung on them and their panties.

Had they been aware of the forums watching the bout, they would have noticed the ratings of the game shoot up by a good margin.

*“We played around too much. We’re not going to last much longer at this rate.”* Akeno grimaced in pain as she pushed herself up and measured the distance between them and their opponents. Retreat and attack were still possible, but if they left now, then the odds that they’d suffer large damage from another combined attack later were near inevitable. *“Gasper, are you nearby?”*

*“Oh thank goodness you’re all right. I could practically feel that blast from where I was hiding. Be careful. Riser just attacked Kiba and he might come for you next. I’ll try to get there in a… Ah? Aaah! He sees me! I have to move!”*

An explosion echoed in the distance.

Akeno grimaced, realizing that Gasper couldn’t be relied upon in the immediate future. They were on their own for now. *“Koneko. I’m going to need you to defend for me so I can get close. Get ready to move as fast as you can. I apologize ahead of time if this doesn’t work. Or you can blame Issei for teaching me a trick that only works at close range.”*

*“Don’t worry. I already blame him for everything.”*

*“Good girl.”*Akeno smirked as her hands began to charge with power and her right hand held onto the tools for their victory. *“On the bright side, at least we’re already used to dealing with fireballs.”*

*“Stop compounding my trauma.”*

“They’re quite sturdy. Although, I suppose that’s what you can expect from a pair of idiots.” Ravel lamented their failed results of their attack before turning to Yuballuna and noted some injuries she had. “Let me heal you. No need to carry on useless baggage like that.”

With an almost lazy flourish, the Phoenix generated a gentle sparkling golden yellow flames that enveloped the Queen. Instead of burning the woman, the embers had the opposite effect and quickly restored her to almost peak condition, much to the Gremory Peerage’s shock and horror as the results of their prior efforts were literally burned away.

“Are you kidding me?” Koneko swore in frustrated anger. “The midget chicken’s a *healer*?”

“We underestimated them. It’s fortunate none of our other battles have been drawn out.” Akeno frowned. “We would not fared nearly as long if that one was allowed to support some of her other teammates.”

“I see you’ve made further progress in your studies, Ravel-sama.” Yuballuna smiled as her aches and pains vanished.

For the briefest of moments, a flicker of bitter guilt and anger flittered across Ravel’s face, however it left as soon as it came leaving only smug look of confidence. “Well of course. Who do you think you’re talking to?”

A spark and rise in Devil power caught their attention before she could continue gloating. Both women turned to Akeno and Koneko, who were both blitzing straight towards them and spiking their magical power.

*“Ravel, Yuballuna. Be careful. Gremory’s Bishop is capable of slowing down time, and her Knight was the one that made the blinding dagger that the Rook used. Odds are that everyone in the peerage is armed.”*

Riser’s warning cut into their conversation, getting them back on track…

By this point, Akeno and Koneko had already started their charge to close the distance between them.

“I know you were joking before, but I think they actually are idiots.” Yuballuna stated in half awe and half amusement, lifting her staff once more to ready the finishing spell.

Ravel sighed, generating her half in sheer boredom. “I expected more from them.

A bolt of lightning pierced through the space between them and disrupted their spell.

“Tch. She’s more accurate than we thought.” Yuballuna grimaced as her magic circle was obliterated and she had to defend against a follow up bolt. Their combination attack required some focus, and they couldn’t divide enough between attack and defense to pull it off without getting blasted. Say what you would about lightning spells, but it was without question the fastest of the elementals when executed properly.

“Just shoot them with normal spells. One good hit should finish them.” Ravel used one hand to generate a defensive barrier while the other launched fireballs to impede the oncoming blitz.

Surprisingly though, their new approach of spamming generic attacks didn’t do much as Koneko came up to bat spectacularly and literally, wielding half a broken electrical pole of all things that she had picked up from somewhere, no doubt a piece of debris leftover from the earlier devastating combination attack, and was smacking away the spells like some demented half naked midget batter.

It didn’t help when Riser dropped the bomb on them. “Cardboard… Boxes?”

A repelled fireball nearly beaning the Phoenix returned her to reality, though did nothing to her growing sense of dread and guilt. “Just burn everything!

 “How is she hitting back our spells?” Yuuballuna grimaced as she was forced to defend herself from errant lightning bolts while setting the area in front of her aflame indiscriminately. Truth be told, she was also shaken up by Riser’s revelation, only she had the experience to not let it distract her from the matter at hand. “Ravel focus!”

“Too late!” By this point the Gremory Peerage had covered two thirds of the distance between them. Close enough to finally put their plan into motion. With a final burst of speed, Akeno thrust her hands forward, completing her spell long before her opponents did.

A bright light and a loud thunderclap erupted throughout the battlegrounds and momentarily blinded the pair, however ever since word of Koneko’s dagger got out the members of Riser’s party had fitted themselves with anti-blinding magic. It wasn’t perfect and they did have spots in their eyes, but it didn’t cripple the two fire users like it would have otherwise.

“Tch.” Yuballuna blinked and tried to regain her bearings and instinctively put up another magical shield in front of her. Light intense enough to overwhelm anti-blinding spells? That wasn’t normal, even for lightning specialists. Either she’s part Angel or she was trained specifically to overcome the standard defenses. “Ravel-sama? Are you hurt?”

“No. Just annoyed. What a petty trick.” Ravel shook her head before enveloping a hand in a peculiar sparkling fire and brushing it over her eyes. Within seconds her vision had returned to normal. “Give me a moment to hel-Yuballuna look out!”

Riser’s Queen braced herself and upped her barrier’s strength just in time to defend against a loud and bright blast of electricity that seemed to flood and shoot off errant bolts of electricity in every direction around the point of impact. It was so bright and annoying that Yuballuna could barely make out Akeno’s form just a few meters in front of her.

“You stupid girl! Don’t you listen?! Your lightning can’t break through my shield!” She snarled, more annoyed than anything that she had been put on the defensive as flaring lights danced past her. By all rights, she should have finished this by now.

Her offhand was supporting her defenses now while her primary with her staff began to manifest the spell that would all but ensure her long deserved victory. The Priestess of Lightning would spend the next month in recovery with deep burn wounds, healing or not.

Unfortunately due to the lightshow, not only did she miss the growing smile on Akeno’s face, but she also completely missed the thin cables that started from the Priestess of Thunder’s outstretched hand and flew past and around the magical shield from multiple sides, hidden and propelled by the seemingly ineffective flashy lightning spell.

Each line tipped by a small kunai, a dagger produced by Kiba himself. And all made of highly conductive metal.

Akeno’s skill and control wasn’t nearly enough to remotely guide or steer the daggers to strike at Yuballuna behind the shield. The fine control and dexterity for a trick like that was beyond her to learn in half a year, let alone three weeks.

Fortunately, she didn’t need to learn such esoteric skills.

All she needed was a simple and cheap spell that even a distracted child could cast in an instant. A pedestrian spell used to spin and twist like wrapping or unwrapping a piece of candy, only on a slightly wider scale.

All the wires that passed around the shield quickly began to twist behind the target’s back, while Akeno held onto the lines on her own end until…

“YUBALLUNA!!!” Ravel shouted in alarm, seeing what was happening just before the inevitable took place, but unable to do anything as she was beaned by Koneko’s improvised bat.

And just like that the Queen was ensnared from behind and pressed into her shield.

For just a brief moment, Yuballuna wasn’t in the Rating Game.

Instead she was in College again, facing down an impishly smiling preteen boy. One that had hidden some cheap cables inside the torrent of flames he had just blown. Cables that had caught her over extended right arm while he held the other end in his sparking hands.

“… They really were taught his tricks.”

Akeno then unleashed the high frequency electricity through the cables without restraint, instantly bypassing her opponent’s defenses.

*“Riser-SaM*AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!”

 And the Phoenix Queen was lit up like a Christmas tree.

“No!” Ravel shouted, half her body aflame from recovering from the wounds from earlier. Making sure to be outside of Koneko’s strike zone this time, she manifested as much fire as quickly as possible and unloaded it all at Akeno, who just barely managed to get away from the torrent and destroying the wires in the process.

She then turned attention to her injured comrade and switched flames, fully intent on healing the damage done before the situation could get worse.

Yuballuna wasn’t defeated or knocked out, but she had seen better days. She wasn’t a pleasant sight, burnt to half a crisp and barely managing to hover in the air while her entire body twitched rampantly. All in all, she was putting up a laudable effort to stay in the game in her current condition.

At least, she did so for the grand total of four seconds before Koneko changed targets and beaned her with the telephone pole, line driving her into the nearby already half destroyed gym wall.

“That’s for trying to nuke us earlier, bitch.” The Rook growled in her almost usual dry tone.

“You brat! How dare you gya?!” Ravel was about to get revenge on Koneko when Akeno let loose a powerful bolt of lightning that forced her back once more.

“Koneko! Get the Phoenix Tear! Hurry! I’ll hold her back!”

The Nekoshou wasted no time trusting her back to Akeno and leapt to where the slowly vanishing Yuballuna was embedded into the ruined building. If the Queen had enough time and mobility, she could still manage to recover with the priceless healing consumable if they didn’t act fast.

“Hngh. Already on top of me. How forward of you.” The older woman grimaced as Koneko started to frisk and pat her down.

“Shut up and tap out already.” It didn’t take long for the small girl to find the crystal vial between her opponent’s breasts. It was a common holding spot for well-endowed women that specialized in magic. There were even books dedicated to spells to pull off the whole “boob pocket” gimmick.

“Fufu. I could probably manage one last spell if I wanted and take you with me, but consider it a prize for doing so well.” The Queen’s body began to fade. “A word of warning though. Though your Peerage has made considerable progress, you will need more than a quick heal and the tricks of a dead child to beat Riser-sama.”

The small girl stilled. “Dead child, what do you-?”

“KONEKO!!”

The shout of alarm was enough for her to completely forget that she was in arm’s reach of her opponent and turned around to defend herself.

Half a second later, she realized that she should have just run. There was no defending from the titanic and scathing orange fireball that was coming right for her.

Her arm was yanked back, curtesy of a still vanishing Yuballuna.

“Fufu. Sorry, but I never said I was willing to let you go. I suppose I haven’t outgrown those petty habits after all.”

Time seemed to slow down for the Rook as her painful defeat seemed to fly closer and closer. Even if she managed to free herself now.

She looked to her hand which still had the stolen Tear, she made a decision and reached back to throw it in a direction that was closer to Akeno…

Fortunately her Hail Mary didn’t come to pass as the oncoming inferno was intercepted by an equally large and vicious mass of literal *destruction*.

The Rook grimaced as the explosion and shockwave hammered into her and destroyed a good part of the gym behind, but the good news was that she was still somehow still intact. She believed part of it was due to the fact that Yuballuna served as an exceptionally convenient and well placed cushion. Or cushions if one wanted to be technical. She hurt too much to care either way.

Speaking of which…

*Riser Phoenix’ Queen. Retired.*

“Tch.” Riser, flying nearby, glanced to the side to see Rias approaching from behind some nearby buildings. “You have impeccable timing my betrothed.”

“As flattering as that is, I could say the same for you, Riser.” The Redheaded beauty brushed off his compliment without hesitation as she fearlessly approached with Kiba and a shaken Gasper at her sides. “It appears we both had the same idea in mind. A pity it appears that it all played out before we could intervene.”

“Yes. A great pity indeed.” Riser glanced irritably at the destroyed Gym and the retreating Koneko. Of all the setbacks that had taken place during the Rating Game, Yuballuna’s defeat was one he had not anticipated or could take lightly. His Queen was of a far higher quality than the rest of his Peerage save for Ravel. Her loss was genuinely concerning.

He turned his attention to Rias again, or rather, the diminutive child that he had barely noticed before. “So, that’s your illusive Bishop. Riser admits, he was not expecting such a hilariously weak looking child to pose such a threat.”

He trailed off as Gasper, already pale, sweaty, and panting from earlier, took out an IV packet of red fluid and bit into it with surprisingly sharp teeth.

A blonde, effeminate vampire that could manipulate time…

“Heh. Hah!!!” Riser couldn’t help but let out an incredulous laugh of amusement.

“What is so amusing?” Rias frowned in confusion as Akeno floated to her side. She didn’t dare look back or see what her Peerage was doing, but judging from the few words she could hear, Koneko was handing her Queen the Phonex Tear to prep for the final fight.

“Your Bishop, Gremory.” Riser snickered. “Forgive Riser, but he believes that small child’s very existence is a joke in itself. An effeminate blonde vampire…”

Rias’ peerage all stilled at the description. But none more so than Gasper, who was still drinking from the blood packet.

“You have *got* to be joking.” Kiba muttered under his breath.

“… That can *manipulate time*?” Riser snickered.

“Seriously?” Ravel grimaced as she floated to her brother, healing herself from the shock damage she got from Akeno.

Sirius and Isabella smirked as well, emulating their master, but they were clearly confused as to what he was getting at.

“Oh my.” Akeno giggled in a dark and malicious way while cracking off the top of the Phoenix tear vial and using it on herself. “This is a rather peculiar turn of events.”

“Nooo.” Gasper whispered as a tiny amount of blood slowly dripped from his lips. His eyes slowly began to dilate and glow red while his body shook in slowly accumulating rage. “No. Not another oneeeee. Don’t say it...”

*Dragon blood.*

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Should Riser assume his name is Dio as well? Hahahah-!”

Riser’s laugh stopped.

*Riser* stopped. Literally. In the middle of the air. In the middle of his laughing. In the middle of the fight. In the middle of everything.

“My NAME. IS. GASPER!!”

“Riser-sama?!” Sirius and Isabella shouted, clearly confused and alarmed by this shocking turn of events.

“He just had to say it.” Koneko sighed. “I was wondering when Gaspy would finally snap.”

“B-Brother?!” Ravel stuttered in astonishment at Riser’s condition before getting a good look at Gasper again. “Wait, you’ve got to be joking! He can actually STOP time?! He wasn’t just dilating it?! Where on earth did you find someone as absurd as that?!”

“Thirty seconds!!” Gasper yelled, all of his focus and sight honed in solely on the asshole that had dared call him Dio. “Take them down!”

“You heard him!” Rias was not one to delay or look at a gift horse in the mouth as she gathered her powers and unleashed as much hell at Riser’s remaining forces while taking care not to get in the way of Gasper’s line of sight.

“Aye aye!” A fully healed Akeno cheered as she blasted more lighting at Ravel before she could attack Gasper with her own fire. The younger Phoenix dodged it for the most part, but was clipped in the shoulder, causing it to burst out into fire before regenerating. “Ara? Looks like we have another member of royalty to deal with…”

“She’s mine!” Koneko, still half naked and heavily injured shouted as she jumped up and rushed the stunned girl with clenched fists.

“What is that idiot thinking?” Ravel grimaced as she powered through he pain. She wasn’t like the rest of her family. She didn’t have a high enough pain threshold to be mutilated at least a hundred times before finally calling it quits.

That said, that wasn’t to say she didn’t know how to use her immortality to her own benefit.

A plume of rich sunny colored fire accumulated in her hand. She’d take the blow and be in a perfect position to finish off that stupid Rook. At the very least, it would finally reduce Gremory’s numb-

Her thoughts were interrupted as she was slugged in the face, and her body did not burst into flames to mitigate the damage.

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*“So do you want me to pussyfoot around it or give it to you straight?”*

*Koneko held back an annoyed grunt as Issei leered over her during their first private training session. “Just get it over with perv.”*

*He shrugged in an “oh well” sort of way. “Out of everyone in the Peerage, you’re the least useful.”*

*Her patience immediately jumped to almost its limits and she was barely resisting the urge to use her inhuman strength to tear his balls off. “I told you to get it over with.”*

*“Your situation requires exposition Jail Bait. Deal with it.” He wasn’t intimidated. “Weeb has raw power. Yandere and Man Slave are versatile, and the latter and Dio are your supporters. Right now? You’re just a body. Granted, your group needs all the bodies it can get, and you are durable, but that’s all you are right now. You can hit kinda hard and get hit hard back. Don’t even try to pretend that you can’t see it yourself.”*

*The Rook tightened her small hands into fists. Fists that could crush boulders and lift trees if she wanted. Fists that could hurt him if she felt like it. Fists… that were the same as everyone else’s.*

*“So?” She managed to ground out. “What should I do then?”*

*He lifted an eyebrow skeptically. “You’re studying those books I lent, aren’t you?”*

*She faltered. Ki training. “Ah. Right. Those.”*

*“You’re stuck?”*

*“… A bit. They’re a bit complicated. I have a good feel for Ki, but I don’t know how to make it flow right.”*

*Issei stared at the girl that was making a point to avoid eye contact with him.*

*And then he sighed. “Hah. I thought this might happen.”*

*“What?”*

*He gave her a dry look. “Learning Ki by yourself from scratch is a bitch and a half to pull off. Even with books. Best and fastest way to get through the first few steps is with another experienced user to walk you through it. Problem is, the general process involves physical contact and reading the other’s Ki.”*

*Koneko faltered, recalling her first encounter with Issei. Just touching him by accident nearly rendered her catatonic for the afternoon.*

*“Yeah. Exactly.” He shook his head and sat down. “Fortunately, since you already know what I’m like and are prepared for it, my mess of a system won’t drive you nuts this time. Maybe.”*

*Koneko definitely didn’t like the idea of exposing herself to his Ki again, but she couldn’t argue against his logic either.*

*She did pause though when he took out a knife. “I thought we were practicing Ki, not combat.”*

*“We are.” He didn’t bother to explain any further as he stabbed the back of his free hand without any hesitation deeply, causing her to jump.*

*“What the heck are you doing?! This is messed up, even for you!!”*

*“Relax. This is your training. Come here.” To Issei’s credit, he only grimaced slightly as he dislodged the weapon from his flesh and allowed his wound to bleed profusely. “Ki is all about internal energy. Just shy of Youjutsu. We both know you have a natural affinity for them. They have heavy ties with life and healing themed powers. Even boost said powers in most cases. So we’re going to exploit that relationship to give you an idea of how to properly manipulate and channel your abilities.”*

*Koneko faltered, her focus completely honed in on the deep gouge in his hand. She knew Issei was crazy, but… to hurt himself this badly just to teach her how to use her powers? It didn’t make sense.*

*Issei went on without paying any attention to her reaction. “You’re going to put your hands on mine when I heal myself. I want you to just monitor my Ki and magic. With your natural talent, it should only take two or three times before you’ll be able to mimic what I’m doing and amplify the healing process. After that, reinforcing yourself and other basic tricks like hitting back spells, coating other objects in Ki, and-”*

*“Why?”*

*“Eh?”*

*“I thought you hated us. Me.” Koneko looked at him completely bewildered. “Why would you hurt yourself just to teach me something? It doesn’t make sense.”*

*He stared at her with dead fish eyes. “I hate a lot of things Jail Bait. I hate liars. I hate idiots that come to conclusions before they clearly don’t have all the information about a topic. I hate being around people. I hate self-entitled pricks. I hate being delayed from my projects. I hate being responsible for jobs that I want no part of. I hate being useless. I hate the Cougar being lazy and careless when she could be productive, and then blames me for it. I hate having my privacy constantly being intruded on. I hate the fact that I can’t even pretend to be dead without causing problems. I hate the fact that my mom is constantly pretending that everything is fine when it isn’t just for my sake. I hate how the Faction Leaders keep on trying to treat me like their friend even after what they did to me like it wasn’t a big deal just to get on my good side again. I hate how completely fucked up I am. I hate being perpetually tired. I hate being unable to ever get a full night’s sleep.”*

*The more he listed his grievances, the more Koneko realized that while Issei was a pain in the ass, in spite of his vicious behavior and surly attitude, he really was at his core surprisingly a genuinely good person.*

 *“… But, individuals? There are only a small handful of people that I can bother to hate. Everyone else can just get thrown into a general lump sum category for all I care.”*

*Tired.*

*That was what he constantly complained about being since she met him. At that moment, looking into his eyes and talking to him, for once she felt like she understood just a little the invisible weight that he seemed to constantly carry on his back all the time.*

*He shook his head. “I don’t hate you guys, Jail Bait. I never have. I just don’t want to deal with people anymore, period.”*

*She, really didn’t know what to say to that.*

*He lifted up his bleeding hand. “As for this? It’s just the best and fastest way for you to get a grasp of things. Reading healing magic through Ki is easier than self-enforcement for beginners working from scratch. Either way, it’s no big deal. I can heal it up no problem.”*

*“Doesn’t it hurt?” She was a Rook. Her job was to take hits, but getting stabbed like that through the hand was not pleasant, inhuman body or not.*

*He shrugged. “Yeah. Like a bitch. But I’m used to all sorts of pain these days. I get seriously messed up way worse than this at least twice a year. Not like I can get much more fucked than I already am regardless.”*

*“That’s not something to be proud of.”*

*“Never said I was proud of it. Just the way it is. I am however, proud of all things related to porn and sex.”*

*“I’m calling the cops.” It was an empty threat, but also a kneejerk reaction that usually worked in situations like this.*

*For a moment, it almost looked like he was going to laugh. “… Tell you what. You actually quit pussyfooting around the training and I’ll fork over your sister’s number.”*

*“… And why would I agree to that?”*

*“She’s scarier than the police by a very wide margin. Especially when you’re involved.”*

*“…”*

*“…”*

*“… She still cares about me?”*

*“Jail Bait, I’m going to level with you. She’s your fucking stalker. It’s getting to the point where if you don’t do something soon, I’m pretty sure she’ll kidnap you by the end of the year and hide you in a dungeon basement.”*

*“You’re serious.”*

*“I’ve unfortunately had enough experience with stalkers over my life to recognize the signs. On a side note, I apologize in advance if she uses any of my ideas or products on you in said future dungeon basement.”*

*She pointedly ignored that last part. “Why anyone would go for you that hard is beyond me.”*

*“… If only.”*

*“Huh?”*

*“Never mind. Are you ready to do this yet?”*

*“No, but I might as well try.”*

*“Good, because I’m pretty sure I hit the Deep Palmar Arch artery when I cut myself and lost enough blood to become anemic.”*

*“… Idiot.”*

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CRACK!

By the time Ravel realized what had just happened, she had already fallen halfway to the ground.

“What the… my head?” She tried to make sense of her condition but found it hard to think, let alone see straight. “A concussion? But, how? I’m a Phoenix. That shouldn’t…”

“BIRD!!”

Ravel’s delirium was interrupted as Koneko dive bombed her from above and tackled her to the earth below.

Hissing in pain, the blonde couldn’t help but begin to panic as she tried to figure out just why she was hurting and being injured so badly. Her body naturally burst into flames after a certain threshold was passed as a defensive measure. The glowing fist raised above her shouldn’t, wait.

Glowing fist?

She gasped as the Rook’s knuckles embedded themselves deeply and viciously in her stomach and robbed her of air.

And yet her body didn’t burst into fire.

“Ki. User?” Ravel wheezed in genuine surprise. She was familiar with the uses and applications of Ki, Touki, and similar practices from her medical studies.

However, only those with exceptional talent and or education had the ability to wield their Ki in a way to nullify the natural gifts of others. Say, to prevent them from reverting into an elemental form to disperse or nullify damage.

Koneko responded not with words but by rearing back her fist again and decking the stomach again.

“Ravel-Sama!” Sirius charged to rescue her Master’s sister, but was interrupted by Kiba who appeared right in front of her with sword in hand.

“Sorry, but I’m going to have to make this quick.” The Swordsman brandished two seemingly normal looking blades save for the odd runes that lined the fuller, the length of them and the somewhat elegant looking guards.

“You coward!” Sirius brandished her far larger Zweihander with a vicious scowl. “I’ll gut you for insulting Karlamine’s honor!”

Kiba sighed before taking a stance. “My apologies, to both of you…”

The runes on his blades began to glow.

His knees bent slightly.

And he vanished.

“What the GURK?!” Sirius’ question was interrupted by the rune blades that stuck out of her stomach. “When did… how?”

“As meager compensation for my actions, I’ll grant you at least this much for you to tell your fallen teammates.” Kiba’s blades pushed further into her from behind while still smiling and behaving like a gentleman. “My Sacred Gear allows me to make more than just swords that can shine brightly, as you can see. Originally I merely made weapons to counter my enemy’s abilities directly. Light against Dark. Water against Fire. Rudimentary but effective applications. However recently I’ve been diversifying my armory. The blades inside you for example are capable of magnifying the user’s speed by a rough twenty percent.”

With a swift yank, he removed the metal from her back and backed away as she collapsed to the ground.

In an impressive display of grit and willpower, Sirius roared in anger and wildly swung behind her to try and catch the source of her anger unawares. She was an impressive sight, spilling and spraying her blood in a wide circle as she yelled and spun.

Unfortunately, she hit and saw nothing.

Her back then screamed as a cross slash tore her apart from behind.

“Each.” He corrected himself while flicked his blades to rid them of the freshly drawn blood. “They magnify my speed by twenty percent *each.* And since you clearly are not a speed focused Knight like myself and Karlamine-san, well, I’m afraid that I’m a poor matchup for you.”

“Bas-tard.” Sirius collapsed to the ground, unable to keep her body upright anymore, and her body began to vanish.

“I assure you, I am more than familiar with what you feel.” Kiba truly lamented, recalling just how many times Issei had humiliated him and the others throughout the past few weeks.

*“Riser Phoenix’s Knight. Re-”*

BOOM!!!

An explosion to the side drew his attention to where Isabella, Riser’s Rook, was flying through the air like a ragdoll curtesy of Rias blasting her with the Power of Destruction.

As for Riser’s sister…

“Go to sleep. Go to sleep. Go to sleep. Go to sleep.” Koneko muttered quickly and frantically as she literally wailed on the poor girl in her attempt to knock the girl out of the Rating Game before Gasper reached his limits. It was so vicious that honestly, the bulk of Rias’ Peerage felt pity for the poor victim.

But Koneko didn’t feel pity for her. She knew without a doubt that if there was one member of Riser’s Peerage that needed to be taken out of the equation before their King came back, it was not Yuballuna but the girl she was brutalizing at that very moment. If they could not get rid of Ravel, whey would have no hope of winning.

*“Riser Phoenix’s Rook. Retired.*

“Five seconds!!” Gasper shouted loudly and not without a great deal of strain. If one paid attention, they could see that not only his pupils, but the whites of his eyes were now bloodshot now.

“Koneko! Move!” Akeno shouted as she conjured up as much high frequency lightning as she could. It may have been a bit much given the circumstances, but she was not taking any chances at this point.

Koneko jumped.

Akeno attacked.

“GHAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!”

Ravel screamed.

“Tch.” Gasper blinked.

“-Hahahaha ah?” Riser’s time resumed course. He laughed. He heard his sister screaming. And he stopped to look hat his beloved sibling was electrocuted.

“Ara. A pity. I was hoping to spare him from the worst of the sight.” Finally stopping her assault, Akeno sighed in a way that didn’t convince anyone that she was sorry.

“Ravel!” Riser shouted in genuine surprise and concern as he rushed straight to her without paying Rias’ Peerage any mind.

For the briefest of moments, they considered attacking him while his back was turned. However they refrained. Even after all they went through, they still had their limits on poor sportsmanship.

“Brother.” Ravel’s bleeding and charred body was already starting to vanish as she was held gently by him. It was a surpising sight, as riser had never openly shown that level of tenderness with anyone before. “I’m… sorry.”

“It’s fine. Riser will take care of things. You don’t have to worry.” He comforted her with an unusually subdued voice, completely empty of the usual boisterous and annoying confidence he normally had.

“Be, careful. You were right.” Her body was all but gone now as she vanished. “They really do, fight… like…”

Riser didn’t get up immediately, preferring to stare at the spot where his sister had vanished. He knew she wasn’t dead, and would get better soon enough, but still…

“… Praise is in order, Rias.” Slowly, he stood up tall, but didn’t bother to face them yet.

Koneko and Gasper fell back. Both were exhausted and injured to one degree or another. They’d only get in the way if they tried to participate now.

“Riser believes, that this is the first time that Ravel has been injured to the point that she was forced to retire in a Rating Game. No. This is the first time Riser’s entire Peerage has been humiliated to such an extent. It is, an enlightening experience. Riser will have to put greater effort into their training and growth after this. What you have achieved, with what you have, for your first Rating Game, it is nothing short of miraculous.”

Rias began to sweat. Not out of fear, but because the temperature in the area was rising rapidly and did not show any signs of slowing down. It was already oppressive and she had little doubt that it would soon become overwhelming. “Your compliments are welcome, but I am inclined to inform you that we have no intention of stopping here Riser. We aim to win this contest.”

Much to their surprise, Riser barked out a crude and bitter laugh. “Compliments? Riser apologizes, but he was not praising you or yours, Rias. If anyone deserves Riser’s halfhearted praise, it would be the one that taught you the methods and tactics you employed.”

Whatever Rias and her Peerage had been expecting, it wasn’t that surprising revelation.

Before any of them could ask him what he meant though, Riser turned around with an expression so uncharacteristically furious and cold that their words died in their mouths.

“To think that Lucifer would dredge up that grave, now of all times. He must have gotten on his hands and knees to convince the Whore and that Silver Brat to teach you. After what had transpired, Riser did not expect either of them to grant any Devil the dignity of their attention again. To be that desperate, how disgusting.”

“Ara. This is quite an unexpected development.” Akeno tried to put up a brave front, but with each passing second it became more and more abundantly clear that Riser was on a completely different level than the rest of his Peerage. Cheap and petty tricks would not be enough to win this.

Flames started to erupt from the nearby surroundings. The flammable first. Wood and grass ignited quickly. Metal began to sear. Water boil.

Riser didn’t care for what he was doing to his surroundings, or the sudden look of unease that Rias was giving him. “Riser hopes you and yours have truly prepared for this, Rias. Not for this fight, but for the consequences of your brother’s haphazard actions and hopes. Because Riser knows from experience that there are some wounds that even Phoenix tears cannot heal.”

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