Chapter 21: There’s a sex joke here somewhere. You just have to find it.

I don't own Highschool DxD, any of its characters, or any references in this story. If I did, horrible things would happen. Neither do I own any other anime that I reference. I do own all OC's and new abilities in the story as well as every ounce of pure awesome spawned by this.

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Rias sat at the dinner table in front of her peerage plus Raynare, a stern expression on her face. “I believe we all are aware of the purpose of this meeting.”

They all nodded. “Sempai.” Gasper surprisingly was the one to respond first.

“He’s being more of an ass than normal.” Koneko grunted before munching on some of the complimentary snacks.

“It’s to the point where even he’s surprised at how bad it’s getting.” Kiba frowned.

Akeno hummed. “It’s becoming quite vexing. Something’s clearly getting under his skin since we came here.”

It was almost two weeks into their “emergency shounen montage training period” as dubbed by Issei, and truth be told, they were making astounding progress in their respective fields. Kiba’s versatility in his swordcrafting was far ahead of where it had been. Koneko had a solid foot into Ki manipulation, and Akeno had made leaps of progress with her pure elemental magic abilities. Rias’ hold over her power of destruction had reached a level that she had not assumed she’d reach for years. Gasper could use almost all of his abilities without fail or freaking out, and Raynare…

Raynare could dance and twerk on a pole for three hours straight like a gymnast without falling… yeah.

However, despite all of their progress Issei seemed to inversely grow more irate and unstable as the days went on. He’d snap at others more easily, and stomp off on his own faster. What they all noticed though was that whenever they pointed it out to him, he’d freeze as if a deer in headlights, avoid the topic like the plague, sometimes apologize, and quickly wrap things up before isolating himself while ranting about needing more porn.

It had been easy to overlook at first. It was Issei after all. He was prone to doing that from the start. However it soon became apparent that something was off when he was doing it five times a day.

It was hard for him to hold a minor conversation without completely snapping at someone now. Even Gasper, who he actually liked and had patience for.

“What do you think it is?” Gasper asked with mixed confusion and concern. “Did he tell anyone?”

“You’re joking right? Since when does the perv tell anyone anything that isn’t porn related?” Koneko scoffed.

“… *Is* it porn related?” Gasper took a wild guess.

The room was oddly quiet as they contemplated his inquiry. The sad thing was that none of them could outright deny the possibility of it being the case.

“For the sake of rationality, I’m going out on a limb and say no.” Kiba lamented that he had for a moment believed that the source of his current issues was related to porn. “If it was he would have been more open about it.”

“Yeah, it’s usually getting him to shut up about porn that’s the trick that everyone’s having trouble figuring out.” Raynare sighed, lazily leaning her head against a hand. “Not that he does anything else. Lazy useless shut… ah fuck.”

“What is it?” Akeno blinked in confusion. Judging from Raynare’s tone she had just figured something out.

“He’s a shut in.” The Fallen replied in exasperation as if it was the most obvious answer.

“It hasn’t driven him nuts before.” Koneko failed to see the logic. “Gasper’s also a shut in and he’s doing fine here.”

Raynare rolled her eyes. “He’s a *dragon* shut in, you idiot. One that’s kept himself in his room for at least half a decade and hasn’t spent more than half a day outside of his hole at any given time.”

“His *den*.” Rias connected the dots quickly and realized the problem. “He’s spending too long outside of *his* secure territory and its affecting him subconsciously. It wouldn’t be surprising if Issei didn’t catch this issue either. And with how insecure and unstable he is on a normal day…”

“He’s always had trouble sleeping for long, even before we came here.” Gasper slowly sat up straighter. “He’s looked more tired than normal now that I think about it. Has anyone seen him fall asleep at weird times like he normally does?” It wasn’t uncommon to find the Sekiryuutei to be asleep in the middle of meetings, classes, or even when people are talking to him at times.

“I think… actually…” Akeno trailed off before realizing that it had been a while since Issei had properly nodded off in her presence. A quick glance around the room indicated that everyone else was in a similar boat.

“We have to find him. It will only get worse if we don’t do anything.” Gasper grimaced as echoes of his own insecurities began to bubble up again and he reached for a paper lunchbag with eye holes to pull over his head. Surprisingly, Issei had not once mocked him for his new nervous habit.

“And do what? Send him home?” Kiba asked skeptically.

“We help him sleep.” Rias’ answer came so quickly that everyone else in the room was caught off guard.

“That’s it?” Koneko blinked surprised.

“No, it’s not.” Their King shook her head. She had never gone over with anyone other than those that knew Issei intimately about what the inside of his mind was like. “It’s complicated. There’s something inside his psyche that’s constantly tormenting him. Something foreign. The dregs of some sort of magic tied so tightly to his insecurities that nobody is able to get rid of it for good. I’ve been in there once and helped hold it off with Asia. The night of the attack. But I don’t think I can get rid of it for long by myself.”

“And now that he’s outside of his den for so long, this abomination likely has a stronger reign over his subconscious than normal.” Akeno hummed, leaning her head into her hand in a way that a finger played with her lips. “Fufu. How curious. Well, of course I’ll help. How can I turn away a chance to put our adorable dragon into my debt so he can behave?”

“Koneko.” Rias turned to her Rook. “I know you don’t like physically interacting with him, but with your recent Ki training with him you’d know how his internal energy works better than anyone here. You’d be a great help to us.”

“… Fine. If it will make him less of an ass.” Koneko mumbled after a few seconds of reluctance. “He better pay us back with something decent after this.”

“It’s Sempai. He’ll think of something. And then relate it to porn in some way, but he’ll think of something.” Gasper replied with some trepidation.

“You’re supposed to convince me to help, not change my mind.”

“You two just go to my bedroom. I’m likely going to be teleporting the both of us there when I find him. For obvious reasons, I’m unable to warp us into his room. He’ll likely pass out on the spot if he’s as stressed as we think.”

“Wait, why don’t you want me there? Not that I’m complaining.” Raynare asked confused.

“Because we’re trying to make him relaxed and sleep well.” Rias replied factually.

“And?” The fallen was still confused.

“When was the last time you two held a conversation without any underlying threats of some form of assault? Sexual or otherwise?”

“Oh come on! That’s profiling! Virgin tits tries to at least verbally molest him every other hour! Why aren’t you holding her back?” Raynare pointed to Akeno absently.

“Hey!”

“Yes, but unlike you, how often does she actually intent to follow through with her teasing?” Rias skeptically lifted an eyebrow.

“Rias!” Akeno faltered with a blush, not used to being put on the spot like this.

Raynare retreated with a lazy wave. “Right. Forgot. Coward won’t do anything even if she’s given the chance.”

“I’m pretty sure if anyone tried to do anything with Sempai, they’d die. Horrifically.” Gasper interjected absently while sparks started to dance around Akeno. Judging from the looks on the Queen’s face, she was having an internal debate on who she wanted to zap first.

“Everyone knows that already Gaspy.” Koneko blandly chided. “Only an idiot would try otherwise. Which is why Rias-sempai doesn’t trust the old dusty hag.”

“Say that again Furry!”

“Kiba, Gasper, can you two make sure that the cabin remains intact while I go get Issei? It shouldn’t take me too long.” Rias sighed as she got up and ignored the potential disaster unfurling in the room.

“Sure, but how do you figure it won’t take long?” Kiba frowned. “Issei’s loud as hell, but that’s usually when other people are around. If he wants to be alone, it’s a pain to find him.”

“Because I sent out my familiar to look for him earlier, and she’s already found him.” Rias got up and smoothed out her skirt. “Just be ready for me to get back. I don’t mean to brag, but I think I’ve gotten pretty good at getting him to calm down and listen to me lately.”

“I’ve heard homeless people in America say the same thing about their pitbulls.” Raynare deadpanned.

Rias paid the fallen no mind as she walked out the building and made way to the part of the woods where she knew Issei was trying to be alone.

She didn’t know that it was also where he was trying to reshape a boulder with his head.

Thunk.

Crunch.

“Fuck!”

Thunk.

Crunch.

“Fuck!”

Correction. Succeeding in reshaping a boulder with his head. Now he was just trying to imprint his face into it.

“DAMN IT!” The Sekiryuutei swore as the stone broke under the force of his thick skull. He must have hit it particularly hard given the amount of blood that was coming from his cut skin, but it didn’t stop him from holding onto the base of the remains with frustrated infused rage. “What the hell is wrong with me!? I’ve done working binges longer than this at least a dozen times!! Why is it so hard this time!?”

**“That was when you were stable.”** Ddraig’s voice chided. **“Jasmine was around then as well. You’re out of your house isn’t helping matters. It’s affecting you more than either of us thought.”**

“I’m not even doing anything that hard!” The teen snarled. From her angle, Rias could only just make out his bloodshot eyes and the deep bags under them. “I’m just training them! In mostly the basics at that! Why am I going nuts?! I can barely be around any of them without biting someone’s head off!”

Fortunately not literally, though it did take a few hours for Gasper to recover from the brief chewing he got yesterday. It was that incident that actually prompted Rias to take the initiative on the issue.

**“You know why partner. You have trouble getting rest as it is. This extended trip away from familiar territory is picking at something both of us were too negligent to notice.”**

Thunk.

This time Issei didn’t seem to bother attacking the poor rock and merely settled for resting his skull against it while letting his legs collapse and drag him down the side. “Ha. Haha. You’ve got to be joking. It’s bad enough that I’ve been reduced to this pathetic mess, but now I can’t even leave my home for longer than a day without getting *worse*?”

The stone where he gripped it began to shatter in his hands, unable to handle the weight of his frustration.

“What the hell am I even doing anymore?”

That was as much of a cue for Rias to step out into the open as any. “You’re trying.”

“… And now I can’t even notice when the Weeb is stalking me.” Issei bitterly laughed. “Well, at least it’s not the cougar. Might actually have to stick to the no witnesses rule with that one.”

“For my image’s sake, it was my familiar stalking you. I just followed her instructions here.” Rias maintained her usual confident air as she approached him, though a bit slower than she normally would. “You look like you need more help than normal, Issei.”

“And we came here for the opposite. Ironic.” He bitterly mumbled, not bothering to look up at her.

“I’ve learned to expect things to twist in peculiar ways whenever you’re around. This is no different.” She squatted down next to him, not at all bothered that she was giving him a clear view of her underwear and thighs in the process. In fact, if the view did manage to distract him she’d consider it a boon. “When was the last time you got any rest Issei?”

From this angle, she had a good look at his face, and she’d be lying if she said he was as expected. Apparently Issei had managed to scrounge up some spell or porn trick to hide just how terrible he looked when he was with everyone else. He had gone past looking deranged and was now flat out sickly.

“Dunno. Forgot. S’all a blur.” He muttered, avoiding eye contact and focusing on the boulder he had been abusing. “M’tired.”

“Can I try something?” She asked carefully. “I promise, I’m just trying to help. You look terrible.”

“Gee thanks.”

“Give me your hand.” Since he didn’t flat out turn her away, she assumed that he was giving her the benefit of the doubt.

“Sure. Don’t see what you can do though. I’m crap at magic, but I’m pretty resistant tooo…”

Thump.

While Issei was dismissing Rias’ attempts to help, she had taken the initiative and moved his nearest hand to grab her left breast.

Judging from the fact that he had immediately passed out upon contact, she assumed that her suspicions were on point.

That said, it was slightly awkward that despite passing out, Issei had yet to actually let go of said breast.

“Well that was easy.” She laughed nervously, slightly leaning forward so that he wasn’t stretching her chest.

**“Only because Partner is in such a frail state. As peculiar as his disposition is, even he wouldn’t normally pass out with such minor stimulation.”** Ddraig chided, still awake and aware of what was going on.

Fall into a blissful delirium and start rambling nonsense about the glory of oppai, more than likely, but not pass out.

“I’m going to take him back to my room so we can rest more comfortably. I hope you can help keep him calm once he wakes up. I know he doesn’t like having his quirks being taken advantage of, but he really is in a bad state.” Rias turned him over to get a better look at his face and grimaced. It was going to take more than a night of rest to recover from this.

**“So long as you do not take advantage of him more than you already have, Gremory.”** Ddraig’s tone turned slightly malicious.

“Even if Issei isn’t a member of my peerage, I still intend to treat him as if he is one. In case you haven’t noticed yet, I have surrounded myself with problem children that I love all dearly, and I doubt that is going to change anytime soon. I have no intention of taking advantage of anyone I care abooouuut!” The Gremory heiress staunchly held her ground. Or at least she tried to until Issei began to unconsciously grope her chest in a way that sent tingles all over her body. Somehow, most of which were located particularly in her lower body.

Jasmine was right. He was really good at this.

**“Humph. So you claim. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”**

“If you thiiiiink that Issei is going to push me away simply because he’s a bit goooood DIFFICULT! I mean difficult, you don’t know me that well.” Below the pair, a sigil with the Gremory mark began to glow, indicating that they were about to teleport. All things considered, it was impressive that Rias could manage to summon up the spell while being stimulated as much as she was.

**“You are mistaking the source of my warning girl.”** Ddraig’s voice echoed in the woods just before the spell took effect. **“It’s not partner you should be keeping an eye out for.”**

Ddraig didn’t speak again after that.

The rest of the day had gone as Rias had planned. She, Koneko, and Akeno had laid Issei down in Rias’ king sized bed and took a nap beside him.

All of them woke up in different locations in his subconscious, and eventually with some effort, they managed to push, blast, and punch away the white specter that was haunting him, if only temporarily. That said, even Rias could tell that it was stronger than the last time she encountered it.

The rest of the night went by peacefully as the three rested against the curled up dragon in the back of the cave. It had taken Akeno and Koneko some time to get comfortable enough to approach it, but eventually they realized that Rias was right. Issei wasn’t going to hurt them, and he was surprisingly warm and comfortable to be around when he was relaxed.

Even better, the girls all felt unusually energized and rested when they came to next to Issei. Even more outstanding was that, outside of a momentary minor moment of alarm where he almost threw all of the girls off of him in a blind panic, Issei was for the most part quiet and docile for almost a full day.

He was even reasonable enough to only blind everyone at most twice with the daggers stolen from Kiba that day instead of the usual half a dozen… though he never explained how he managed to get his hands on them despite the fact that Kiba never made them after the first few days of training.

That said, Rias was still curious about something that had taken place.

In Issei’s subconscious, Koneko appeared at the mouth of the cave, and Rias was near where Issei had been…

But Akeno had been sent somewhere else inside the cave. Although she wouldn’t say where for some reason, it seemed to confuse her as much as everyone else. She would only say that she appeared somewhere that she apparently wasn’t supposed to be.

It was the same for the three other times they managed to sleep with Issei that week. No matter who was there or who wasn’t when they all rested, Akeno was always appearing in that peculiar corner of his mind that she wasn’t supposed to.

It was odd, and they all wanted to know what was going on, but it was not important right now.

They had a rating game to win.

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*The day after Issei got some actual rest, the training changed.*

*And it started with everyone standing in the middle of a clearing…*

*Plus the giant three story tall fire dragon construct sitting patiently next to Issei.*

*He wasn’t bothered by the overwhelming heat it was giving off in the slightest.*

*Everyone else was.*

*“All right scrubs! Now that you’re all barely passable in the abilities you’re practicing it’s time to put it all together!” He shouted loudly for no real reason other than to probably look impressive. “Given the amount of time we have left, I’m going to skip the usual anime bullshit trope of making you all try to figure out my mysterious bullshit lessons and spoon feed it to you so I can get back to my porn!”*

*“Couldn’t even get past the intro without leaning back on porn, could you?” Raynare deadpanned.*

*“Fetch!”*

***“ROAAAR!”***

*“GYAAA!?! The fuck!?”*

*Issei paid no mind to his fire dragon trying to catch the frantically fleeing Fallen Angel in the background and continued his lecture. “The lessons will be broken down into two sections! What you can do to an elemental enemy, and what your elemental enemy can do! Theory will be short and application will be the bulk of your hell!”*

*He pointed to the sight behind him. “The primary problem with fighting elementals is that their very existence makes it difficult being around them! In gaming terms, they produce a passive field effect that is a detriment to everyone and everything around them! Fire elementals make things hot and unbearable! Ice makes everything cold and unbearable! Light and Dark elementals screw with your senses! Fighting an elemental going full blast is going into a fight with a pain in the ass debuff that will screw you sideways before the enemy does! And that’s before taking into account their intangibility, recovery, and battle prowess! Unless you are absurdly powerful, properly prepared, or the situation is that terrible, you should NEVER get into a drawn out fight with an elemental! That will guarantee an ass kicking!”*

*“Huh. When he puts it like that it makes a lot of sense.” Gasper tilted his head to the side in deep thought.*

*“That said, there are multiple ways an elemental can fight.” Issei went on. “What you see behind me is the way an idiot elemental fights. Aggressively and personally going after their target. Only an overconfident fool would take that route right off the bat. Wasting energy and exposing oneself to potential ambush like that.”*

*He began to pace, clearly in lecturing mode. “It is far more common and efficient for elementalists to stick to ranged attacks to wear down the enemy. Hold their ground on territory that is already under their control. If it is a fight that HAS to be won, they usually win the game of stamina.”*

*Issei then stopped and turned to them with a hard expression. “And then, of course, there’s the chance that your opponent isn’t completely retarded…”*

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Instead of gloating, berating, or attacking the Gremory peerage after finally letting go of his self-control and becoming a human sized inferno, Riser bolted up to the sky in a burning pillar.

It took a few moments for their eyes to readjust to the flashing lights, but their ability to sense magic was more than capable enough to detect the vast spike in power when he reached the apex of his flight.

“HE’S NOT RETARDED!!!” Koneko shouted in alarm first, triggering all of the peerage to turn and run as far and fast as possible before they were caught up in the worst spot possible.

If Riser had heard them, he didn’t pay it any mind as he charged up more energy to the point that he looked like a momentary second sun for several long seconds before unleashing it all in a flood of combustion so thick it looked like a fluid more than anything.

Not at the Gremory Peerage directly, but at the ground itself.

“GASPER!”

However, before said attack made contact with the world, despite all the power it contained, the titanic and overwhelming force somehow was frozen in place as if the pause button was pressed.

“Hurry!!” Akeno shouted as Koneko carried Gasper on her back and increased the distance between themselves and ground zero, the latter facing backwards so that he could stare and delay the oncoming disaster.

“I can’t hold on for long!” The vampire grimaced. It had been less than three minutes since he had held Riser in place for thirty seconds, and he could already feel the immense strain inside his skull giving birth to a massive headache. “Seven!”

In emergencies like this, they had all quickly trained Gasper to give them a countdown of how long he could maintain a target. It gave them time to prepare, coordinate and plan.

Issei had been very creative with those that couldn’t adapt to this simple tactic quickly.

They were already halfway across the fields to the forest now. Going into the woods was beyond stupid, partially because it was already on fire from earlier, but also because it wouldn’t do them any good to fight a fire elemental going full ham there in general. That said…

“Use the shed as a barrier! Reinforce it!” Rias ordered as they approached the gym storage shed on the far end of the field. With Gasper’s eyes and time limit, they’d just barely avoid the worst of the fallout.

Indeed, just as they skidded back around the small shed and Rias and Akeno got to work bolstering it up, Riser’s everything went back into motion with the force of a small bomb. Fire rolled everywhere like a fast moving flood, bowling over everything that wasn’t nailed down and setting alight everything that was.

“Ara! That man! Doesn’t he know that women get turned off by the pushy type?” Akeno tried to joke as she and Rias held up their defenses with a strained smile while heat radiated from what felt like every direction. It was an admiral attempt to lighten the mood, but it didn’t do much.

After all, as the pressure finally began to lessen on them, the reality of the situation finally pressed down on them. Riser’s impressive attack wasn’t meant for them in the slightest.

“Kiba.” Rias glanced back at her knight.

“Tch. I know Buuchou.” The owner of Sword Birth grimaced as he began to prepare specially designed daggers for everyone for this situation in particular.

Daggers that protected the user from the intense heat of the local environment.

After all, the only thing worse than fighting an elemental in general was fighting one in their home territory. And judging from all the fire around them, Riser had very much just given himself an even more obnoxious advantage over them than he already did.

It wouldn’t do jack against any of Riser’s attacks directly, which were bound to be even more overwhelming and diverse in this setting, but at least they wouldn’t be perpetually sweating and struggling to breathe between said attacks.

He internally debated who to curse out more. Riser for putting them in this terrible position, or Issei for predicting this very situation happening in the first place.

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*“Now that you know how to avoid assured instant defeat before you can even do something like worthless redshirts, it’s time to go over what the hell you actually can do against an opponent whose body is more random energy when you attack it than physical mass.”*

*Issei glanced down at Rias with a dry expression. “First of all, the idea of simply overwhelming them with your own power and make them hurt enough to make them give up is cute. And not going to work against anyone that isn’t at least a full tier of power lower than you. Elemental regeneration is bullshit for a reason people. Unless you can hit it with at least the same amount of power with the countering element for maximum effect, or you are just that much more powerful than them, then don’t even try to get into a dick measuring contest with them. Because they will cock slap you so hard your mother will feel it.”*

*Rias pouted and looked away. Clearly her original plan had a few kinks in it that required addressing.*

*“That isn’t that the base logic isn’t valid. Mentally exhausting and attacking your target is a valid tactic, but only if the means to do so are just as valid. Underestimating your opponent just because they’re an asshole is a surefire way to looking like an idiot.”*

*“You must enjoy many of your fights then.” Kiba drawled casually.*

*“I don’t pleasure myself dominating the stupid. I have standards.”*

*“YOU FUCKER!! CALL OFF THE DRAGON ALREADY!!!” Raynare shouted hysterically as she ran full tilt in the background while said dragon pounced after her like a puppy playing with its toy.*

*“… The Cougar has long since proven to be incompetent. Not stupid. There’s a difference.” Issei tried to excuse his actions, but failed to convince anyone.*

*“So, about beating elementals?” Rias got him back on track with a strained smile.*

*“Right! Overwhelming elementals! Fortunately, the asshole that trained me, while not exactly one, did share many similarities with them. And after much trial and error, I did find ways to get even with him every once in a while, so I am familiar with how to get around some of their regeneration. Unfortunately, none of you are medics, so a good number of those methods aren’t available to you.”*

*“I’m pretty sure that unless you’re registered as a battle medic you’re forbidden from using most forms of altered healing magic to harm others in a rating game.” Akeno hummed in thought. “It was to make sure that most damage done during the games wasn’t done permanent on accident.”*

*“… Huh. Guess someone was actually listening to me about those precautionary measures I was ranting about after all.” Issei looked genuinely surprised for a moment before shaking his head. “Never mind. I wouldn’t teach you guys how to do that anyways. Not enough time for that regardless. None of you alone have what it takes to take down a high end High Class Devil that’s an elemental that isn’t stupid enough to stand still and constantly take hits from you like some overconfident dumbass. Together though, you have a shot. But only if you don’t fuck up.”*

*“And how are we supposed to do that?” Koneko asked.*

*“By fucking them into submission.”*

*“…”*

*“…”*

*“Oh my.” Akeno positively gushed.*

*“… I don’t know why I got my hopes up.” Kiba muttered darkly.*

*“I swear if he’s leading this into a joke about getting the ass arrested because I’m jail bait.” Koneko began to crack her knuckles menacingly.*

*“Please don’t mean literally. Please don’t mean literally.” Gasper prayed, somehow not invoking the usual divine consequences on him for being a devil.*

*Rias didn’t say anything. She just sighed and looked down at the ground dejected. She knew that Issei was leading into something, but the idea of fucking Riser in general kinda put her off for obvious reasons.*

*“YOU ASSHOLES!! WHY ARE YOU STILL TALKING!!” Raynare shouted in the background, still being chased by the giant fire dragon. “YOU’RE THE ONES THAT ARE SUPPOSED TO BE TAKING THIS THING ON! NOT ME!!”*

*Her cries landed on deaf ears.*

*“Is that it?” Rias looked at Issei skeptically.*

*“Is that it?!” The teen balked before slumping over and looking more dejected than the peerage. “Ugh. This is why dealing with civilians is so annoying. “Is that it?” they say? No understanding or appreciation of the finer things in life.”*

*“You’re lamenting that we have no understanding or appreciation of a “proper fucking”?” Akeno asked skeptically. She may be a virgin and hold herself like a proper lady, but she liked to think that she had a very diverse appreciation and understanding of the carnal arts.*

*“Considering the fact that I’m currently convinced the lot of you waste your personal time on five minute gonzo homemade videos made by attention seeking exhibitionists in their one bedroom apartments posted on pornhub? Yes.” Issei deadpanned. “None of you clearly have any idea what goes into a true proper quality drawn out FUCKING that will render the precipitant nothing more than a drooling incoherent mess of flesh and fluid on the floor whose only purpose is to be used for however long the other party sees fit.”*

*Okay then. When he put it like that, Rias couldn’t help but be interested and a bit aroused by the prospect.*

*Judging by the fidgeting that Akeno was making, she wasn’t the only one.*

*“Huh.” Koneko’s eyes narrowed in deep thought. “So long as I keep sane and stick to thinking he’s talking in metaphors, this isn’t starting to sound half bad.”*

*“I’ll still need a minute to divest myself from reality to that extent.” Kiba politely threw in his two cents.*

*“I need an adult?” Gasper looked around hopefully for some help.*

*“The only adult around at the moment is the Cougar, Dio.” Issei genuinely looked remorseful as he reminded the young cross dresser of their current situation.*

*All Dio could manage was some depressed whimpering at the reminder.*

*Akeno tried to not be stimulated further by the show.*

*“Right! The rest of your training from now on will be how to reverse fuck the asshole that’s trying to fuck you! In your case, in the form of a gangbang!” Issei clapped his hands together and rubbed them together, completely ignoring Gasper’s current state of depression. “Now the first step for any proper fucking is the setup…”*

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“How’s Gasper?!” Rias shouted as the flood of heat finally began to die away.

“He’s not hurt, but he’s going to need time.” Koneko grimaced. “Holding back the flaming turkey twice over pushed him hard.”

“Get a box then. We’ll stall him as long as we can until he’s ready.” The redhead frowned as her mind worked a mile a minute.

“But-!” The young bishop tried to protest.

“Gasper we can’t guarantee our win until you’re able to be at your best!” She snapped a bit louder than she should have. “Riser’s stronger than we thought, and he’s probably pinned you as his biggest threat by now and focus on you first! Remember the plan and set up the box!”

“Waaah!” Wailing in fear and compliance, the effeminate boy stopped arguing and took out the last piece of cardboard from his pocket dimension and quickly began to fold it into a box, the magic circle he had made on it earlier glowing as he did so.

“You still have blood left?” Koneko helped him, her eyes flickering up every half a second in preparation for an attack.

“Half an IV bag.” He grimaced. Just a small sip of Issei’s blood was enough to knock him on his ass under normal circumstances. If he wasn’t burning through magical power like crazy, he’d probably be delirious by now. “It’s strong stuff, but jumping around between boxes is harder than it looks.”

“Drain it. We’re on the final stretch. We’ll end this when you step in again.”

“R-Right.” He nodded just as they put the final folds in place…

“INCOMING!!” Akeno shouted in tandem with the temperature around them spiking to more overwhelming heights than it was already.

o. o. o.

*“Against an opponent like yours, odds are they’re going to set the pace before you get started. That’s fine. Let them get overconfident. Let them tilt their hand first and show you what their tempo is first. Prepare for it. Adapt to it. Familiarize yourself with it. Bide your time until that key moment when you change everything to your favor.”*

o. o. o.

BOOM!!

Unlike the immense wave of fire that was intended to set everything alight before, the fireball that destroyed the shed they were hiding behind was made with the sole purpose of destroying the structure and everything behind it.

Flying a good thirty feet above the ground, Riser scowled as he spotted Rias’ peerage skid to either side of the crater he had just made, dancing between where his fires were at their smallest…

All save for the time stopping Bishop, who was nowhere to be found.

And yet, he had yet to hear Grayfia’s announcement of the annoyance’s retirement.

“Tch.” His sharp eyes spotted the half obliterated cardboard box falling to the ground in the distance and he already figured out what had happened.

A quick examination of Rias’ peerage indicated that they were not being as affected by the overwhelming heat of the landscape either. Devil or not, being perpetually baked like that would affect anyone that did not have the proper skillset or of a certain level of power. Power that was beyond even Rias at this point in time. Either they had prepared a spell for this sort of situation, or there was some other annoying gimmick at play.

Either way didn’t matter ultimately. He would emerge victorious regardless of what tricks they played.

After he made his ire known.

His eyes turned to Rias. Gone was his overconfidence. Gone was his self-assured pompous attitude. All that was left in him was cold irritation and conviction of a degree that even struck his fiancée still, if anything out of pure surprise.

And then he pointed his hand at Koneko to his other side and unleashed a new torrent of fire.

His actions had caught everyone off guard.

“Koneko!!” Rias shouted in alarm. Due to all the previous fighting, the Rook was already in less than optimal condition. Even at her best she would have struggled to avoid the sudden surprise attack.

From where she was, she wouldn’t be able to help her Rook in time. Neither could Akeno…

In a flickering blur, Koneko’s body vanished just before it was swallowed by the flames. The following instant, she reappeared in Kiba’s arms a short distance away, the Knight holding one of his speed enhancing blades in one hand with the girl secured in the other.

“You all right?” He asked with a kind smile.

“Whiplash sucks.” She coughed out dry air and ash before shaking her head. Rook or not, the sudden change of inertia that came with being rescued by a Knight sucked.

“Sorry about-?! Unclench your jaw for a sec.” Kiba’s warning registered in the girl’s mind just before she was jerked about at blinding speeds to avoid being burned alive again from above.

“Annoying bug.” Riser muttered under his breath. He hated to admit it, but Rias’ Knight was far faster than anticipated. Whether it was natural or by other means was up in the air, but it was none the less another peculiarity in the Peerage that would cause questions eventually.

He decided to change his attack to a more wide spread rain of dagger like embers to catch the bug when he was hit from behind by a bomb like spell that impacted him like a hammer despite his elemental disposition.

“Riser! How dare you go after my Koneko in front of me!!” Rias roared in pure fury as she flew up to his elevation, a stupid move all things considered that Phoenex clan Devils were experts in aerial combat.

Aerial combat and immortality aside though, that last attack had actually hurt.

“Hypocrisy doesn’t suit you Rias. Or do you assume that I would dismiss what you had done with my peerage?” His eyes narrowed as he noticed the manifestation of the power of Destruction around her. Unlike the few scant times he witnessed Rias’ powers prior, this brand of it felt more concentrated and refined. If anything it was more akin to Sirzech’s use of the legendary power.

It appears that she had been holding back on him as well.

Well, it wasn’t like she was the only one.

Before she could reply, Riser once more made a move, whipping his hand about viciously and unleashing a harsh cyclone like wind below her. It was enough to force her to move even if it wasn’t aimed directly at her, but that was fine.

His eyes turned to Akeno as his spell hit the flaming earth near her and looked carefully at how she would react.

After all, wind and fire magic mixed fantastically well together.

A titanic crimson funnel howled like a demon itself and reached for the sky, emitting as much heat as it seemed to suck in the air around it. So much so that Rias’ Queen was having trouble keeping her distance from the monstrosity even with the aid of her wings and enhanced magic.

That was until a familiar blast of red and black streaked past him and detonated against his creation, destroying it in a massive and borderline eldritch like explosion.

“… Hoh. Riser is starting to see what your role in this farce is now, Rias.” He turned to look at his fiancée once again with a cold and calculating stare that betrayed more intelligence than he normally let on.

For a brief moment he played with the idea of focusing on the rest of her peerage again to make her suffer for her indiscretions, but thought better of it. Dragging things out would work against him in more ways than one.

He was fighting against a group that was trained with that insane boy’s tactics. A group that had taken to them well enough to wipe out his entire peerage without a single loss. It was a feat that was as commendable as it was concerning.

The sooner he ended this disaster, the better.

Particularly before that annoyance of a Bishop recovered from wherever he was hiding and truly make things difficult once again.

Even now he had trouble believing that bad joke. A vampire that could stop time? Where on earth did Rias get such a monster?

… No. One headache at a time. First was the Rating Game.

With an almost casual whip of his arms, Riser threw two whirlwinds past Rias at the ground to kick up more fire, heat and dust, wrecking the already abused landscape and disturb his opponents more than they already were.

Then another pair of twisters. And another. Dodge Rias’ unusually powerful attack. Another pair.

Disturb and burn the landscape. Up the heat. Create obstacles. Mix the elemental spells he had to maximize their effects. Make the fight even more of a pain for his opponents. Wear them down. Control the battlefield. Make it work for you. Disrupt their teamwork. Pick them off.

Be the unbearable asshole of the battlefield.

Simple tactics. Efficient. Cheap.

Also ones that had been ironed into him by that annoying brat years ago. Ones that he normally could ignore the whispering of in the back of his head.

*“When are you going to actually start trying for once, bird person? This is the reason why everybody that doesn’t have their head up their ass doesn’t like you.”*

“Tch.” His flaming wings flared. His teeth grit. His fists clenched. His temper spiked.

He was thinking too much.

A half dead Rook.

A knight who was fast and could make half useful swords.

A Bishop that could only delay the inevitable.

A semi competent Queen.

And a King that didn’t know her place.

He was wasting his time.

He lifted his hand and discharged a heavy blast of fire at his fiancée. Far heavier than what was to be expected from a farce like this.

Much to his suppressed amusement and to her credit, Rias managed to counter it with only some difficulty, still holding defiantly in the air as she did so.

He wondered if she would last another dozen.

o. o. o.

Ravel came to in a bed with a pair of medics hovering over her and the biggest migraine she had experienced in so long it hurt to think of a previous time to compare it to.

“Ravel-sama. You’re awake.” One of her tenants, a maid from the Phoenex family sighed in relief. “We didn’t know how long you’d be out. It’s not often that someone of your family is injured so viciously.”

“What…” Her mind faltered several times as it tried to recall what exactly happened before her memories finally started to kick in. “The Rating Game. Gremory…”

“Is still underway. Your brother will no doubt emerge victorious, but we must admit, Gremory has proven to be more capable than anticipated.” The other maid’s smile waned slightly.

“Tch.” A bitter scoff caught her attention. Turning her aching head as much as it could, the young blonde girl saw Yuballuna on her stomach on the cot next to her, having her back treated for burns by an additional pair of maids. “Capable nothing. We were careless. If we knew that Lucifer would go behind our backs and go out of his way to ensure that bunch was going to be trained out of Issei’s book…”

“Issei? Who’s that?” Mihae, Riser’s other Bishop asked as she limped towards them, her upper body wrapped in gauze.

“He’s… someone from the past. Someone brother did a severe injustice to that isn’t around anymore. Many still hold brother in contempt for it.” Ravel closed her eyes and tried to push down the feelings she had whenever Issei ever came up. Push down all the things she truly wanted to say about and to him that she couldn’t anymore. “This was before he started building his peerage in earnest, but after Yuballuna.”

“That boy… it always came down to him in the end. Even now. I’m starting to think he put a curse on us. Not that we don’t deserve it.” The Queen grimaced, clenching teeth and fists as she had to fight her own repressed memories.

“He sounds important. Why haven’t we heard of him before?” Mihae frowned in confusion.

“Because brother made a stupid, selfish, ridiculous decision. And because of it…” Ravel almost lost control and said too much, but her elevated heart rate made her headache throb to the point that the pain stopped her.

“Ravel-sama. Please calm down. You’re still injured.” One of the maids gently pushed her back down and began to heal her head again.

“He was a genius. The kind you’d rarely see more than a few in a century at best. And just as insane. Eccentric to the point that no one could hold a conversation with him without wondering if he was actually human or if they were talking about the same things.” Yuballuna elaborated.

“He was also one of the kindest people you’d ever meet.” Ravel couldn’t help but recall the addictive smile and cheer that had always been around the boy.

“With a mouth that would make a drunk sailor sound like the pope.” Yuballuna snorted before hissing in pain from agitating the wounds on her back. “He went out of his way to know fifty ways to say “go fuck yourself” just to say he could and back it up.”

She could still remember the day he proved it too. That had been an interesting day. A better day.

Mihae looked at her Queen skeptically, not used to hearing such vulgar language from her. “Interesting, but what does this supposedly dead child have to do with our current state?”

Both Ravel and Yuballuna frowned as their minds recalled recent and distant experiences.

“Gremory’s peerage, they fight like him. His tactics. His approach to fighting. Crude and simple, but resourceful and horrifically efficient and effective.” Ravel whispered. “He hated fighting more than anyone, but it ironically made him better than almost anyone at it. Nobody could beat him if it was a one on one fight.”

Yuballuna cut in before Ravel said anything too much in her moment of weakness. “He excelled in finding the fastest ways to shut down his opponents, exploiting openings, or make them for that matter. Not to show off, but because he hated wasting time in general on things he didn’t care about. He had zero interest in fighting at all. He’d say something along the lines of, “I have better things to do than waste my time in pointless dick measuring contests”, take out whoever he pissed off in five seconds, and then wander off aimlessly to do whatever he felt like and completely forget that the fight happened in the first place. That boy truly was a piece of work.”

Mihae frowned. “I see… that does explain how Gremory’s peerage is fighting. Those bright daggers were a pain, and their tactics were rather vicious.”

“It was more than that. Gremory’s Queen took me out with a move literally from his playbook. Throwing wires around my barrier hidden under an initial attack, wrapping them behind me, and then channeling high frequency electricity through them at a high elemental ratio.” Yuballuna grimaced. “There’s only a handful of people out there that knew him well enough to teach someone else tricks like that, and they… certainly have reason to hold a grudge against us. Against Devils in general for that matter. Enough to the point that I’m having trouble picturing them willingly teaching Gremory’s Peerage for this event…”

She hadn’t heard word of Jasmine and Vali in years. Nothing outside the whispers that the former was barely scraping by selling her body and doing voice work for cartoons. The latter hidden somewhere by the Grigori. It was a pathetic and nauseating lifestyle for someone as gifted in pharmaceuticals as Jasmine. If only things had turned out differently…

“Unless… unless they *know*.” Ravel suddenly turned pale and her pulse picked up again.

The Queen went stiff, and more fear and adrenaline went through her body than at any point during the fighting that day. “No, you don’t think…? No, that wouldn’t be their reason. They certainly would have reason to spite Riser-sama and myself, but you’re innocent, Ravel-sama. You didn’t do anything.”

“Know what? What are you talking about?” Mihae was lost as she tried to follow the conversation.

“Exactly! I didn’t do anything, just like everyone else! And you know what happened afterwards. That’s reason enough.” Ravel clutched at her head, her agitation making the pain worse.

Think. Think past the throbbing in her skull. If Vali and Jasmine did teach Rias’ peerage for this Rating Game, then what were the tricks and tactics that could actually pose a problem for Riser? Those three knew her brother the best. They knew his strengths and weaknesses better than anyone other than Carnelian.

If she ruled out any random and illegal items and seals, and took into account the peerage’s performance and abilities, at face value they still didn’t have much. The Rook was a Ki user of notable skill, but she was on her last legs. The Bishop was annoying with its time abilities, but they did little else. The knight could make swords. Gremory was passable at the Power of Destruction, but she wasn’t as strong as Riser, and the Queen was a less powerful but still passable lightning user.

Individually they didn’t stand a chance against Riser, but together was there some trick that they could have learned? Issei was more of a solo player, the sort of person that would try and take on anything and everything by himself if he could help it. Outside of his joint projects that required multiple specialties, he rarely worked with others. And since he was so diverse himself, the boy rarely ever came across people that were stronger… than… him…

“Oh no.” Ravel paled. They screwed up.

“What is it?” Yuballuna frowned.

“I know what they taught Gremory.”

o. o. o.

*“All right scrubs! Gather round! It’s time for reverse gangbang fucking 101!”*

*“I’m already regretting this.” Kiba sighed.*

*“I’m not.” Akeno had a pen and paper out, and was looking far too attentive than she should be.*

*“You would.” Koneko deadpanned.*

*“Now then! When dealing with your target, nowforth known as “Fucker”, you must never let your confidence get the better of you. Otherwise, you will be the one fucked in the end!”*

o. o. o.

Rias grimaced as she deflected another one of Riser’s attacks. The heat and intensity of his magic had already torn away a good third of her clothes. She didn’t know how much longer she could last.

o. o. o.

*“Odds are the Fucker will dictate the tempo and pacing of the fucking in the beginning. That is perfectly fine. It is what they expect, and what they intend. They also expect you to put up a fight. To resist their advances. To be difficult. So give them what they want. Taunt the Fucker. Play the Fucker. Endure the Fucker. Bitch and moan as much as you want to make it convincing. Sell that shit to the Fucker and his mother so they enjoy the show. Take a love bite or two if you have to. But above all else, be patient and wait. It will be hard, long and drive you mad, but it is also one of two of the most difficult and arduous things you will have to endure when it is showtime and everything is laid bare.”*

*“… Are you doing this on purpose?”*

*“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Now close your mouth and swallow the inspiration I am bestowing upon you all. There are loads more to come.”*

o. o. o.

“How much longer do you intend to waste my time, Rias?” Riser shouted irritably as he blasted her again. He had assumed that she would go down after the first dozen attacks.

He had lost count how many times he had assaulted her after the twenty fifth spell.

A flash of silver flickered past his eyes and he clicked his tongue as his outstretched arm fell to the ground below, only for it to fall apart into fire as if it was an illusion halfway down while his “injured” arm regenerated with the same embers effortlessly.

He didn’t waste time looking at the source. This wasn’t the first time Gremory’s Rook had stabbed or slashed his body apart with weapons that the Knight had made.

It was part of the reason why he had lost count of attacking their King in the mid-twenties.

He twitched slightly as a hole punched through his chest via a bolt of lightning.

The Queen was the other part.

“Vile annoyances. If Riser wasn’t so tired with this petty game, he would have taken all of you out by now.” The fire devil cursed while his chest cavity returned to an unblemished state, before throwing more wind magic in their directions and controlling the ambient flames in the area to assault and distract them. Whether or not they were actually defeated didn’t matter, so long as their incessant peppering stopped long enough so he could have a moment to actually think again.

The screams he got as a response were all he needed to know that his near aimless efforts had borne some results. Sadly, no verification from Grayfia to indicate that they were finally out of his hair.

How annoying. Fruitless ineffective assaults was the best they could do to his immortality. None of their attacks stuck, and he only felt the smallest flickers of pain from them…

Maybe if they weren’t so stressed they would repeat whatever they did with Ravel, but he doubted hit. His adorable sister was a support type. She never could handle direct fighting in person well.

No, she preferred to heal others. Just like…

“Again… How many times am I going to be distracted by that irrelevant fool today?” He muttered in genuine fury. Of all the things that rubbed him the wrong way in the past few hours, the constant reminder of his mistakes was beyond and by far at the top of the list.

Rias was looking like she was finally starting to run on fumes. The fact that she had lasted this long was more accredited to her desperation and pride than anything. Her backup was distracted, and he was irritated. Now was as good a time to finish it.

Power pooled in front of his hand. Fire manifested in such quantities that it gave the impression of being genuinely tangible. A horrifying prospect for anyone that wasn’t a Phoenex to dwell on. It was easily more than enough to kill a lesser Devil. Fortunately, Rias had proven herself to be capable enough to endure this, though not without regrets.

“You’ve had your fun Rias! But this stupid game is n-” *\*BZZK STATIC\** “-ow over!!” With a decisive shout, Riser unleashed his attack…

… At empty space.

SHNK!

A moment later, the pointy half of a sword erupted from his chest.

o. o. o.

*“In a true game of fucking, you don’t waste your main opening on some petty foreplay!”*

o. o. o.

“Another annoying sword?” Riser growled in pure frustration before looking around for Rias. “Where did that woman vanish… no, damn it. The Bishop recovered?”

He glanced down at the sword and barely noted the odd design of the blade. Instead of the usual straightsword, it was flanged irregularly, reminding him of a straightened fishing hook, only with more barbs running down the length.

What an insulting toy. Did they think he was some sort of fish? A petty trinket like this could easily be re-?!

“Tsss?!” He hissed as if a child being momentarily burned by a hot stove. His hand immediately pulled back from the blade.

The very literal ice cold blade.

“BRING HIM DOWN!!”

Turning back to glare at Rias, who had repositioned herself behind him, he noticed three things.

o. o. o.

*“You waste the main opening to turn the show into YOUR show!”*

o. o. o.

The first was that the bulk of the enemy peerage was behind him, sans the Bishop who was no doubt hidden somewhere to make his day even more vexing than it already was.

o. o. o.

*“So the moment you waste that chance, you make damn sure that you stick it into them as hard as you can.”*

o. o. o.

The second was that there was an exceptionally long metal cord attached to the pommel of the sword impaling him.

o. o. o.

*“And above all else. Make sure that once you start truly fucking the poor unfortunate moron for all they’re worth, never…”*

o. o. o.

And the third, which he realized in conjunction with the jerking force that ripped him out of the sky, was that the other end of the chord was in the hands of Gremory’s physically enhanced Rook.

It didn’t particularly register to him that he was screaming as he was swung around like a toy.

Nor the fact that his pathetic display was being witnessed by all tiers of nobility across the underworld.

He did, however, notice when his trajectory was changed so he would be slammed into a part of the battlegrounds that was notably less on fire than everything else.

o. o. o.

*“… EVER…”*

o. o. o.

The moment he regained the slightest bearing and control over his body again, Riser roared in pure fury.

The small crater that he had just made tripled in size from the fire he explosively radiated from his recovering body and-

KZZZT!!

“GHAAAAA?!”

“Ara. It might not be a collar, but I suppose I can do with the leash.” Akeno giggled as errant sparks of electricity arced around her, particularly about her hand which was not grasping the end of the chord that Koneko had just handed her.

Just like Yuballuna said, Lightning was a peculiar element with a bulk of rules around it. Rules that could be used to defend against it...

KZZT!!!

“YOU BITCH!!!”

Or in this case, used to bypass the vast majority of innate defenses that an opponent might have.

Physical damage was one experience that most elementals could mitigate easily. Being directly used as part of a complete high voltage high frequency circuit, not so much.

With a pained and enraged roar, the High Class Devil literally ripped the ice sword out of his body with a vicious heave and a single hand, ignoring the pure agony the action entailed since he could actually *feel it* this time.

o. o. o.

*“… Under any circumstances…”*

o. o. o.

With the other hand, he mustered up an absurd and wild level of power to wipe out the Gremory Peerage in a single go…

*\*STATIC\**

Only for them to vanish from sight just as he was about to attack.

BOOM!!

And a wave of raw Power of Destruction hammered him from above, hammering him back down to one knee.

“RIAS!!” He yelled angrily, turning his rage upward.

Shink.

And getting a new sword of ice through his chest for his troubles.

BZZK!

“GAAAAAAH!!”

o. o. o.

*“… Pull out.”*

o. o. o.

“Hoh?” Azazel smirked as he watched Rias’ peerage literally dance and make art out of Riser. “Not bad.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen one of Issei’s more intricate tactics in action.” Sirzechs nodded, allowing himself to smile as well as Riser was electrocuted for the fourth time. “I’ve forgotten how much of a show they can be.”

“I think I remember this one.” Serafall tapped her chin in confusion. “Seamlessly and endlessly cycling between those dedicated to stunning, those that can open up the enemy’s defenses, attackers dedicated to either holding off the target, and attackers dedicated to pinpoint assaults on the enemy’s exposed weak points. All to lock down stronger opponents while giving their allies enough time between the motions to get some breaths of rest in. I’m actually surprised little Rias and her group were able to learn such an intricate strategy so quickly. They must have worked incredibly hard to get it down right. What did he call it again? Issei always had a flair for naming things…”

o. o. o.

“Carousel.” Yuballuna whispered in numb disbelief as she and the rest of Riser’s peerage watched Rias pick their King apart live, with Rias cancelling out another desperate retaliatory attack of his just as he got back on his feet, only to be impaled by another sword, this time thrown by the tiny Rook to catch him off guard seeing as Riser had been paying attention to the Knight this time. “They’re actually using Carousel.”

“I’m astounded they’re able to use it at all.” Ravel shivered at how well they all functioned together, as if watching a well-oiled machine perform its intended duties without fail. “They have to constantly make sure that their timing is right or else brother will turn the situation, but the fact they can use it to this proficiency at all this quickly is… if I didn’t know better, I’d have assumed that they were taught by Issei himself.”

“Damn it! They’re making a mockery of Riser-sama!” Isabella growled as she nursed her own wounds. “This is embarrassing! If we had just been able to take out even one of them, he wouldn’t be like this!”

Indeed, that was among the heaviest of the weights sinking in the stomachs of all the women in Riser’s peerage. Rias’ near impending victory was solely due to the fact that she had not lost a single member of her peerage. It was due to their perceived inability that their master was suffering now.

“We were all overconfident. Including Riser-sama.” Yuballuna grimaced, no different than her peers. “We assumed that our numbers and experience would ensure our win, but we underestimated our opponents and what they were capable of… and what they were willing to do for their win.”

“H-hey. This isn’t the end though, right? Riser-sama’s strong. He’ll still win, right?” Mira, Riser’s newest member and Pawn asked nervously in spite of receiving glares from many of her comrades.

“He… can.” Ravel grimaced as she didn’t look away for the cruel show. “Brother was actually the one that Carousel, this tactic, was originally tested on when it was first made. If there was a person that would be able to endure and find a flaw in its patterns, it’s him. Not only that, but Carousel is very complicated and heavily depends on timing. If they mess up, brother would be able to use it to escape. Gremory’s peerage was exhausted and worn starting their fight against him. They’re not at their best, and it should show soon.”

Or at least, she hoped it was soon.

A look from Yuballuna told her that the Queen shared her personal thoughts.

Because, if Riser truly intended to win, and Rias’ peerage didn’t let up soon, then they feared that Riser would have to do something unfortunate that would not end well for anyone…

o. o. o.

*It was the last day, and Issei and Rias were simply sitting on the front porch of the cabin sitting next to one another. In spite of some concerns, Issei had told them all to get some rest and stop training to ensure they were at full strength for the events the next day.*

*“I really can’t thank you enough Issei. We really owe you for this.” The redhead smiled, taking a risk and gently leaning to the side and resting her head against his shoulder.*

*To his credit, he only froze up for five seconds upon physical contact and didn’t lash out this time.*

*“Thank me when it’s over, Weeb. You haven’t won anything yet. You still could lose.” Issei grumbled as he stared off into the distance. Judging from his half lidded eyes, he was about to fall asleep again, which was a good sign considering just how much trouble he had doing so just a week ago.*

*“And we could still win.” Rias argued confidently. “Knowing what I do now, I can see why you were annoyed with us. I doubt our odds would even be noticeable if you didn’t step in, but now… now we have a genuine chance of winning. It isn’t mindless hope or pride fueled optimism. I can actually see it as something that can happen without relying on luck or convenience, but out of our pure effort and dedication. You have no idea how much that means to me Issei.”*

*The Sekiryuutei didn’t immediately say anything as he stared off into the distance with a stare that wasn’t focused on anything in particular. “I guess I’m still good for something on occasion I guess.”*

*“Haaah. Even now you’re… never mind. I’ve decided.”*

*“Hm? I’ve suddenly got that feeling that I should be regretting everything again.” He glanced down at her warily.*

*“Stop being such a child.” She giggled, and for once, it didn’t annoy Issei as much as it should have. “I’ve just made up my mind on what to do after this disaster.”*

*“I’m going to object perpetually and horrifically to your future plans, aren’t I?” He deadpanned.*

*“Maybe.” Rias smiled coyly as she slowly scooted closer to him to the point that she could properly lean against his body. “But I have a strong feeling that it’s going to be worth it.”*

*“… Zzzzzzzzzz.”*

*“Yeah. I think so too.”*

o. o. o.

Carousel.

“HAAAGH!!”

It just *had* to be Carousel.

Shink!

BZZZT!

Of all the infuriating tactics that Jasmine and Vali had to teach these flies, they went with the one that took their old group nearly four months to iron down.

\*Static\*

BOOM!

Four months of being blasted, drugged, electrocuted, burned, punched, and essentially being a flaming punching bag for his so called “friends” while they constantly complained at him and one another every time he managed to break free and burn them all like the bastards they were.

That is until they finally got it right and constantly made a game of making him little more than their play thing.

If he wasn’t so overwhelmingly pissed, Riser would have actually been somewhat impressed by Rias and her group. Carousel wasn’t easy to learn. Everyone had their own role to play, and needed to not only know the other’s timing near perfectly, but how to read the target’s as well. Otherwise the entire setup could easily fall apart.

It was that heavy reliance on seamless cooperation that had driven Vali and Jasmine to rage quit so many times when learning it, either due to one another’s impatience, or because Kuroka’s tendency to throw everything out of sorts just for laughs.

*“Oh come on Bird Person. Quit your bitching. It’s not like you didn’t get anything out of it. I mean, your brother has his bullshit overkill regen abilities, but even he admits that he can’t take a direct ass kicking as long as you can and still get back up.”*

He faltered as he saw a flash of vermillion pass his eyes, and for the briefest of moments he had thought he saw a small boy instead of his fiancée taking another pot shot at him.

Then there was that flash of white that darted the other direction, which he had even more trouble remembering wasn’t that annoying brat Vali instead of Rias’ Rook.

BZZT!

“Kuh?!” Oh, that was right, he still had a sword in him that allowed Gremory’s utter bitch of a Queen to electrocute him at a moment’s notice.

He didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to last at this rate. He could barely get a breath in before he was blasted, electrocuted, stabbed, or had his fucking *time* frozen by that blonde midget that was still hiding somewhere.

Worse still was that they knew that the best time for him to escape was between his multiple impalings. Each and every time he rid himself of all the foreign objects anchoring him down and moved to escape or deflect any oncoming blades, his time would be frozen and they would reposition themselves to ensure that he couldn’t escape or defend himself.

It mattered little that he was generating enough heat to nearly melt the ground beneath him. His torturers were all attacking him from a distance and had some means to mitigate the worst of the heat that should be wearing them down.

They had prepared for this fight, and he didn’t. It was frustratingly as simple as that.

*“Why are you still holding back? I mean, you’ve already fucked up everything. Again. What’s a little more fuel to the perpetual shitstorm you constantly drag everyone into? It’s not like its anything new as far as you’re concerned.”*

“Don’t you fucking GAH?!” Riser’s hallucinated argument was cut short as another of Kiba’s swords stabbed him. This wasn’t good. He was starting to weaken enough that he was actually starting to feel the blades now.

*“Well if you keep dicking around like this, you’re going to get your ass beat. These guys clearly know what they’re doing and trust one another. Not like us, obviously.”*

“I said shut UP!!” With an almost frenzied wave of fire, Riser managed to eject the blade from his chest cavity, slashing out his hands for good measure to unleash a wide arc of fast traveling blazes that would-

*\*Static\**

-Hit absolutely nothing just before he was pounded from above by Rias’ power of Destruction once more.

*“Hahaha! Oh man! I have to hand it to those guys though! That time stopping kid is broken as fuck! It’s almost unfair! Seriously, where the hell did that guy even come from?! I almost feel sorry for you! Haha!”*

Damn it. The annoyance was right. The moment he might be able to break away from this mess, that brat would always freeze him in place long enough for the others to regroup and reposition to screw him over again. Whatever spell or sacred gear he had probably had something to do with eyesight. All those cardboard boxes had eye holes cut out in them, and he swore he saw the kid’s eyes glow red at a few points…

Wait…

That’s it.

He was starting to run low on stamina and power, and on his knees, but as much as he hated to admit it, he was still someone that spent years around that insane brat.

Fire and wind were well and good. But when it came to most disasters, people usually noticed the *smoke* first.

His world turned black, but for once it wasn’t accompanied by blinding pain.

Not wasting any time, he threw himself sloppily to the side to avoid getting attacked again, throwing his enemies off tempo. Going up would just make him crash into Gremory and expose himself too early. He needed just a few seconds to think and breathe for a few seconds…

Which was hard to do as a blast of wind that he didn’t make swept the smoke away from a short distance away only a little after one second into his retreat.

Time slowed down, and for once it wasn’t because of the Bishop.

It was the Knight.

He was close.

Without that bastard, he wouldn’t be electrocuted easily by the Queen anymore.

Running more on instinct than anything, a primal roar escaped Riser’s mouth, breathing out a flume of red intending on crashing over the surprised Knight…

And then at the last moment, he was literally thrown out of the way by the Rook before she vanished.

“KONEKO!!!” Riser heard several voices scream, but he couldn’t care less. He finally had an opening. A moment to breathe. Just past the vanishing brat.

“Rias Gremory’s Rook. Re-”

*\*Static\**

BOOM!

The wind was knocked out of him as the familiar, yet distinctively more overwhelming hammering blow of the Power of Destruction slammed into his back and knocked the wind out of him.

Shink.

Followed by the equally familiar sensation of being stabbed from behind.

BZZZT!!

“GHAAAAAAA!!!”

And then electrocuted.

Significantly more painfully than before at that. It was rare that a Phoenex experienced being burned in any shape or form.

*“I think you pissed them off.”*

“I thought I told you to be quiet!!” He snarled, or rather tried to, but came out more as irregular coughs and wheezes.

That blasted girl. He had been so close to breaking their patterns, but that half-conscious Rook had gotten in his way. She had been the least useful in keeping him down, serving as a distraction at best, but… damn it! That’s why she stepped in! She knew she was disposable, so she took the hit instead of the Knight! She was a precautionary defensive measure! The one to take the blows for the others! A self-designated meat shield!

*“Well it’s not like your current plan of getting your ass kicked is helping.”* For once the voice sounded genuinely annoyed with him. *“Seriously, what the hell are you doing, Bird Person? I thought you were done being a bitch for once? Wasn’t that all this was for? To make sure that your fuck up didn’t-”*

“Don’t…” He coughed up ash, remnants of pieces of his insides that had been carbonized from being electrocuted internally so many times.

He might have said something else had Rias not hammered him again with her magic.

*“Don’t what? Remind you of your soon to be next failure?”* The childish voice asked cheerfully. *“Distract you from your current reaming?”*

Riser spate on the ground as he slowly picked himself up. His arms and legs were shaking from the strain. His body hurting in ways he didn’t think he’d ever experience again.

“Don’t talk with his voice, wretch.” The words were more of a whisper, but utterly dripping with malice.

*“Hahaha!”* The laughing in his head slowly warped from that of a young boy’s to that of a mature and seductive woman’s. *“And here I thought you’d appreciate the irony. Bird Person.”*

BZZT!

“GHAAA!!!”

*“They certainly are doing a number on you though. Are you sure you aren’t going to up your game? You really are going to lose soon at this rate, which is something even I am surprised to see. Little Rias certainly has some curious followers that escaped our notice, doesn’t she? Certainly more interesting than the rabble that you scrounged up off of the ground.”*

“Clearly I always had horrid taste.” He grimaced another blade out of his body before trying to dive to the side-

*\*Static\**

Shink.

And was stuck like a pig before he even hit the ground.

BZZZT!

*“Clearly your sense of humor is as tasteless as this show you are providing.”* Riser barely heard the voice over the burning of his insides and his throat roaring itself raw. *“Do make up your mind soon, or even that choice will be taken. The only thing that will change at this rate is who will suffer ultimately. You are a lost cause, but otherwise it is really a decision between who you pretend to care about more. Gremory or-”*

A glare of intense red blinded Riser’s sight, and for once, it wasn’t because of the ass beating he was on the wrong end of.

And for once the voice had been forced to stop talking.

“… Enough.”

As much as he hated to agree with the bitch, she was right. He was going to lose at this rate. And he couldn’t afford that.

His hand grabbed onto the blade sticking out of his chest.

The ice cold blade soon began to glow blood red, and the electrical current was dampened due to the reduced conductivity that super-heated metal usually possesses.

Gremory’s peerage was too apt at Carousel to escape normally. Their timing was too on point, and the Bishop’s power was too absurd to circumvent under normal circumstances. They’d be prepared for any halfhearted attempts.

Hell, he doubted people twice as strong as him would have tapped out before this, if only because his immortality and regenerative properties mitigated a good portion of the punishment he had taken.

Carousel was the right play to make. He had rarely ever managed to break out of it under his own steam once it had got going.

But… Vali and Jasmine had made one mistake. One assumption about him that they didn’t, couldn’t Gremory for.

o. o. o.

*Riser gasped in exhaustion as he knelt before the seemingly unharmed and smiling human child. His body hurt in ways that even he didn’t know about, and yet somehow, for some infuriating reason, in spite of his pride and rage telling him to just leave and give up, he fully intended to push forward.*

*“Come on Bird Person!” The boy cheered. “You almost got it this time!”*

o. o. o.

*“Won’t everyone be surprised when you show them you don’t suck anymore?”*

There were many factors when it came to being strong and harnessing power.

There was how much power a person held. How much they could manifest eventually. How much they could control. How fine one could control their powers. Diversity of said abilities. Nature of said power. The quality of said power.

But, when it came to the absurdly strong, be it in this world or others, there was usually one factor that usually was usually a standard when it came to the truly and disgustingly strong.

How *fast* one could ramp up their powers to the utmost limit, particularly when not fueled by desperation.

Rias and her Peerage knew something had been amiss when Riser had been talking to himself.

They suspected something was off when his body language had changed, and prepared themselves for a last ditch attempt to escape just in case.

They had prepared for the worst when Akeno noticed that her electricity wasn’t flowing as it should through the current blade stuck in Riser.

Gasper had even already frozen the man in time from his hidden spot on one of the nearby school buildings so they could make some distance just in case…

And yet, it didn’t stop Riser this time.

They had not expected for the world to turn white.

For the blistering heat to crash over all of them unanimously like a tsunami, overwhelming and immolating nearly a third of the artificial dimension.

For the last thing they heard along with the howling winds to be the shrieking cry of a beast of legend.

The immense crimson and ivory pillar that shot up to the sky was a sight to behold, and not something expected out of a mere High Class Devil.

Nor was it expected when the pillar suddenly developed a pair of ivory wings, and the top tapered off to reveal an avian’s head.

A Phoenix’s head was in plain view of the world, the true beast of legend and not the mere demonic moniker.

Its beak shrieking in victory and rage for almost ten whole seconds before its image dying off like an inferno that was cut off from its fuel.

And at the center of where all the madness took place, from a distance, only one body could be seen.

“… Rias Gremory’s Peerage. Retired.” Grayfia’s voice echoed ominously in the background.

o. o. o.