Chapter 24: It’s that chapter where the silly character stops being silly and people go “oh shit”.

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In the first few instances after she realized that Issei of all people was the source of the chaos in the middle of the party, Rias was a kaleidoscope of emotion.

Happy. Surprised. Relieved. Excited. Hopeful. Confused. Bewildered. Stunned. And slightly concerned. She had all but forfeited herself to her fate and future with the blonde asshole when the biggest possible spanner in the works literally cut off the entire event in a blatant and shameless way that only Issei could pull off.

She was on the verge of laughing if only due to the absurdity of the situation, when she was cut off by a malevolent growl that not only caused the room itself to rumble, but echo through her very bones.

It was only then, at the moment that her fleeting joy and laughter died in her throat that she realized that something was wrong.

Something was very, *very* wrong.

““... Issei?””

Another moment passed for her to register that she wasn’t the only one that had said his name in the same confused and unnerved tone.

A third passed as she and the other speaker looked at one another in genuine confusion and astonishment.

It didn’t take them long to find the other since they were standing right next to each other.

““Wait. *YOU* know him?”” Rias and Riser asked the other in complete disbelief.

Before their almost comical reaction could continue, another roil of malicious and murderous growls literally shook the entire room like a minor earthquake.

While Rias refused to have anything in common with Riser as a person, she couldn’t help but suspect that they were sharing the same sinking feeling that they had both been played unknowingly, and the consequence of their ignorance was the incredibly pissed Sekiryuutei that was radiating pure *murder* halfway across the room.

“Bird Person.”

*A titanic claw stepped out of the cave, tearing and plowing apart the stone and earth beneath effortlessly.*

“I asked you a question.”

*A second claw brought with it the rest of the head of the torso. A crimson and ebony lined beast taller than the building they were in towered above all there. Scales were flared out about an eerily emaciated frame that somehow made the underlying skeleton and body of the titan even more ominous and terrifying than it already was to the lesser beings that laid eyes upon it.*

“What is this about your sorry ass having a H̶̟͔̩͐̓̎̄̅́̀̚Ạ̶̰̤̻̹̦̅̈̓͋͋̋̈̕R̷̛̛͍̻͇̘̯͖̹͖̳̭̟̱̟̜͚̯͖̎̈̓͗̃̊̏̄̆̓͘̕͠͝͝E̸̛̜̘̟̿̇̈̉͒M̶̛̞̣̪̺͓̔̈́͂̀̽?!”

*From the shade of the cave, for the first time in years, the pitch and vermillion crowned head of the beast saw daylight. Ivory teeth bared without restraint, and emerald eyes with black sclarea burning with raw blind indignation.*

*The Sl▅▅▅▅▅g ▅▅▅▅▅▅▅h was once more awake.*

Rias had only known Issei for a few months, but she liked to think that she had a good grasp on how to read him, his thoughts, motivations, and true intentions most of the time. He was a peculiar case where he was both more and less than what he portrayed himself at all times. Always voicing his feelings on most matters honestly, but always hiding his deeper thoughts and concerns behind his eccentric personality and behavior. So much so that he was frequently a walking paradox, saying one thing but doing another, and the like.

There was nothing being hidden this time. There were no deeper thoughts in those eyes or body language. Only pure emotion and fury.

A sacrosanct line had been crossed. One as tender, precious, and fragile in his heart as the wellbeing of his mother.

Issei truly wanted to murder Riser from the bottom of his soul at that moment.

It was only a few seconds after he had asked the question a second time that it registered to Rias the bizarre way he had said that last word.

Imagine the Mona Lisa, or any other piece of art or work in the world that simply seemed to exemplify perfection. A marvel that could make a person cry in passion just by witnessing it. An unparalleled magnum opus that brought peace to all that gazed upon it.

Then envision that very same piece of work was utterly destroyed. Rendered into shattered pieces so viciously that the work’s name had been redefined on a global scale, now synonymous with that ruined perfection. Stained. Marred. Broken.

Literally redefined into “violated rapture”.

That was the closest Rias could ever come to describing the emotions and way Issei had managed to articulate that lone broken word. Whatever affection and endearment he had for it had been utterly shattered to the point of literal hopelessness and fury every time it left his lips.

She now understood, at least in part, why everyone had stressed to never under any circumstances utter the word “harem” within earshot of the Sekiryuutei. Explosive reactions aside, she would never desire to casually cause such emotional discourse to anyone she liked. Let alone the boy she had come to grow fond of.

Rias had to blink a few times to peer past the image of Issei’s overwhelming Presence to see his actual body a quarter of the way across the main hall alongside one of the walls. For some reason he was draped over the shoulders (surprisingly and not, groping her chest with one hand) of Riser’s *literally* scared stiff Queen, but that did absolutely nothing to lessen the pure animosity that was emanating from the human teen or the glow of his normally brown now green eyes. Around them were some other members of Riser’s Peerage, all fallen back staring at him either terrified or confused senseless.

She didn’t blame them. She’d probably have reacted the same if she was that close when he exploded the way he was. Come to think of it, virtually everyone in the room was more or less paralyzed by the sudden overwhelming pressure and emotions Issei was giving off. Most people would react that way if they suddenly found themselves within spitting distance of an extremely powerful Dragon about to more or less go ballistic.

“Ha. Haha. So that’s what this was all about.” Riser laughed with a tinge of his own unexpected madness just a few feet away from her, taking a step back. She spotted a cold sweat already forming on his face as he tried to keep a confident smile up if only for his own sake. “Riser knew something was amiss, but… no. Riser should have known as much from the start. Only someone as absurd as *you* could survive a battle against the Maou.”

***“I didn’t ask for a pointless monologue.”*** Issei growled menacingly, clearly losing what minor patience he had left if the black and red embers leaking from the mouth of both his draconic visage and his natural body were any indication.

“It takes time to adjust to such a ludacris surprise, you fool.” Riser chuckled almost hysterically. By all rights it looked like he wanted to run at that moment, but didn’t bother simply because he was confident that it was a pointless endeavor.

“You really were alive.”

It was muttered under his breath, so softly that it likely was done as an afterthought, however Rias had managed to hear it, complete with a tone she had never heard from the man before.

Unfortunately, the insult earlier was not the right thing to say to an enraged monster if the trailing flames leaking out of his mouth was any indication.

***“Time you never had.”***

The temperature in the room went to near scalding in an instant as a crimson and black fireball shot like a bullet straight at Riser without little further warning. Just by looking at it, Rias could tell it was a completely different brand of immolation compared to what Issei had produced before, or Riser for that matter.

If anything, it reminded her of her Brother’s power of Destruction in terms of pure overwhelming and horrifying quality.

“Shit?!” Riser flinched and turned to run, clearly not expecting Issei to reach the limits of his patience that quickly, but it was a foregone conclusion to anyone watching. Within a few instants, the young Phoenix was going to, if not die, then get severely harmed with little hope of fighting back.

“... I suppose I should have seen this coming.”

Just before the fireball hit the stage, an equally large and intense orb of raw Destruction materialized in its path, intercepting it.

Upon contact though, instead of an explosion, or one power eclipsing the other, the two *fought.*

‘Fire’ and ‘Destruction’ pressed harshly against one another for supremacy for a good five seconds, the clashing forces growing more and more erratic and oppressive to the point that breathing itself was difficult for those too close to it…

And then both bodies of annihilation, for lack of a better term, canceled one another out, the very intensity of their respective natures eating at themselves and one another into nothingness.

The silence in the hallway was ominous.

The footsteps of Sirzechs as he casually walked onto the stage more so.

“Issei, I thought we agreed that you would try to avoid displays like this tonight.”

Rias shivered and took a step back from ground zero in genuine astonishment. She had admittedly never witnessed her brother go all out before, but by that same measure, she had never laid eyes to anything that could put up a direct fight against Sirzech’s powers either. Normally anything that encountered the Maou’s might was literally obliterated with little resistance or interference. The rare abilities that did put up a fight often either exploded or caused some sort of anomaly that affected the area to circumvent or warp reality to overcome it.

She had never seen anyone or anything flat out *match* and *cancel* her brother before.

Judging from the looks she managed to glimpse of the unassuming audience of the Devil aristocracy, neither had they.

The guilty party in question merely growled, both him and his dragon visage turning their attention to the Maou in annoyance. “**He has a** ***h̵̦͒a̷̰̎r̶̭̔e̸̪͘m̴͓̓***.”

Sirzechs only partially managed to hide a small grimace at the word. Whether it was due to the implications, or the way the enraged teen said it was anyone’s guess. “I suppose he does. But is that relevant right now?”

That was apparantly the wrong thing to say if the beast’s dilating eyes and increase in murderous intent were any indication.

Rias was having trouble breathing. She wasn’t a slouch when it came to power or being around the strong, but there was an overwhelming quality to Issei’s Presence that was absolutely suffocating.

Sirzechs putting his foot down and countering Issei’s unique display of power with his own didn’t help matters.

*Dragon* and *Devil* stood opposed to one another, their very wills and intent was enough to make the very building shake and rattle as though an earthquake was taking place.

Rias stood corrected. This was the first time she had personally witnessed *anyone* standing against Sirzechs without a hit of being cowed once the veil hiding his overwhelming strength was shifted. And the terrifying thing was that she was certain that they were only just barely loosening the restraints of what they were truly like.

**“Move Zechs.”** Issei ordered firmly.

“You know that I can’t do that Issei. I’m quite determined to ensure you don’t make a mistake that you will regret. Remember why you were invited and why you resolved to come at all.”

The power steadily increased in the building, as did the shaking.

Ebony and vermillion bolts of lightning danced around and between the pair.

Sirzechs’ body began to radiate and glow.

Issei’s eyes shone a blinding and vicious green light.

So vicious and intense that his face, both human and dragon, began to take a sickly green color…

And then Issei’s power dropped the same instant both faces cheeks suddenly ballooned out and he went cross eyed.

“Huaaaaghghaah!!”

Correction. His face had turned green all on its own without the aid of mystical powers. Or any form of power for that matter.

It had merely been the preclude of the teen suddenly projectile vomiting to the side.

Judging from everyone’s stunned, confused, and absolutely bewildered expressions, she wasn’t the only one that was caught completely flatfooted by the sudden left turn.

Grayfia coughed loudly and stood next to the still hurling teen, who had somehow managed to conjure up a bucket after he had slid off of Yuballuna’s shoulder and was holding onto it for dear life.

“My apologies, Lord Lucifer. I had warned our guest repeatedly of the risks of over-imbibing, however I was paid little heed.”

“Fuuuualdfhglkfhg!!” Issei tried, and failed spectacularly, to reply to the backhanded insult.

Rias couldn’t help but laugh reflexively at how stupid and ludicrous this had all turned out to be.

Much to her surprise, Riser had done the exact same thing.

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Two minutes later, little had changed. The bulk of the population in the party hall was scared silent. Riser, Sirzechs, and Rias were still on the main stage.

And Issei was more or less puking his organs out into an industrial sized bucket with a vigor that he probably would be normally saving for porn related topics and activities.

The only real change had been that there were only a handful of individuals that were confident, brave or stupid enough to stay in the gap between Issei and Riser. Or near Issei at all for that matter. That said, nobody had left the room either, out of morbid curiosity to see what the hell was going to happen.

“... I believe we’ve waited long enough for the shock to fade away. So, can someone please tell me what exactly is going on?” Rias asked in a fake calm tone that convinced nobody.

“Riser would also appreciate to understand the machinations of his potentially soon demise.” Her fiance warily looked between the two siblings. “The Se… the boy’s survival is notable enough, however Riser did not expect you two to know one another.”

Rias didn’t miss the near slip. Whether it was to prevent a further disaster or something else was anyone’s guess.

“Issei is Rias’ classmate.” Sirzechs answered simply. “He was invited as an associate of her’s.”

“Her… *classmate*?” Riser slowly digested the words as if trying to piece them together. “Remind Riser, but isn’t Rias still in High School?”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Rias frowned. “And how on earth does Riser of all people know Issei?”

“They went to college together five years ago. Riser was one of Issei’s student supervisors. Among other things.” Sirzechs filled in the gaps without taking his eyes off of Issei. “Despite his behavior, our associate is quite gifted. Had situations played differently, he would already be quite the successful entrepreneur by now.”

The Sekiryuutei appeared to be completely occupied with purging himself, but there was not a single veteran in the room that was fooled by the display. The teen was clearly acutely aware of literally anything and everything around him despite his distressed state if the brief glances he gave everyone was any indication.

“His *what?*”

Riser grimaced and had the nerve to look away. “So was this your grand plan Maou? A public execution?”

“On the contrary I had put in quite the effort to prevent us from reaching this point. However you were rather adamant on taking my sister out of Kuoh and accelerating everyone’s timetable. So much so that it caught many off guard, including myself. Most of the potential alternative plans were rendered ineffective as a result of your actions.”

“Out of…” Riser frowned before something clicked in his mind and his face turned pale. “... No. Again?”

“Again? What are you talking about? Sirzechs?” Rias turned to her sibling in frustration and irritation. She hated being left out of the loop, especially when she was supposedly in the middle of the damn thing.

“Brother!” Ravel ran out onto the stage, completely ignoring the Maou and Issei. “I tried to stop this when I found out but… Issei, he’s… I think he really might kill you the way he is now.”

“You’re a dragon’s fireball too late for that warning, dear sister.” Riser laughed almost hysterically while holding his face in one hand and giving Sirzechs a dirty glare. “So if you aren’t attempting to tie up someone’s loose ends, then what is the point of this disaster? As much of a chaotic mess as it is, I doubt whatever the original intended disaster was his plan. Even before the fallout he was never appealed to performing public demonstrations himself. From what Riser has witnessed, that has not changed.”

“Whoalghglakdhg!!”

Riser personally interpreted that as Issei agreeing with him.

Sirzechs was about to answer when a small commotion from the audience interrupted him.

“Enough! What is the meaning of this, Lucifer?!” One of the guest Devils scoffed and stepped out in front of the others. He appeared to be middle aged with black hair peppered with some gray, so by Devil standards he was likely well over a thousand years old. “Your distaste for the engagement is known, but to bring in a *dragon* of all things to interrupt it is a crude act!”

Said dragon in question didn’t seem to care or notice the devil in the slightest if his focus on the bucket was any indication.

Even when the idiot approached him from behind.

“Lord Beleth, I would highly advise against approaching our guest.” Sirzechs suggested with a slight frown. “He is in fact an acquaintance and guest of my sister’s. While his behavior is unsatisfactory,it is best he not be agitated any further.”

“This degenerate mongrel of a child is as agitated as can be already.” Brushing aside Grayfia’s attempt to get in his way, the man stood over Issei’s hunched over form imperiously. “How embarrassing to make a guest do your job, Maou.”

Riser grimaced just before it happened. “Fool.”

The Lord reached forward and grabbed the scruff of Issei’s suit.

Issei went rigid, and his body momentarily glowed with the telltale sign of white magic that flashed up the man’s arm up to his elbow.

There was a full two seconds of silence.

And then the Devil let go of Issei and started to scream, holding his arm in absolute agony.

Admittedly, it was the first time Rias had seen anyone actually actively invade Issei’s personal space, and she couldn’t say she was unexpected with what had happened, but it didn’t stop her from wincing.

“As I was trying to warn you, Lord Beleth, our guest is adverse to being physically accosted.” Sirzechs on the other hand, didn’t appear to react at all to the event. “In fact, he happens to be an exceptionally gifted Battle Medic.”

Issei groaned loudly in frustration, for once not because of the consequence of his inebriation.

God he hated that lame name.

“What the hell did he do to me?!” The Lord shouted in pain and agony. “My arm! It feels like it’s tearing itself off and on fire!”

“Ca-urp!” Issei tried to answer before spitting into the bucket. “Calm down you pussy. I just gave you widespread radiculopathy.”

“What the hell is that you brat?!”

“Ugh. In layman’s terms, I just twisted the ulnar, median, radia, and associated notable branching nerves in your arm. Think contorted testicles, but nerves.” Issei turned and gave the man an annoyed glare as though he was the adult in the conversation. “Now fuck off. It’ll wear off in a week if you don’t keep being a bitch about it. And don’t try to magic it away unless you’re an experienced neurologist. Afflictions caused by white magic are tricky. Try and half ass the treatment and it can easily be permanent.”

Prick should be grateful he didn’t outright maim or murder him. Hell, even Issei was surprised that he had only stopped at minor biological torture.

Normally he would have at the bare minimum induced muscle convulsions so severe that it would have restricted blood flow in the guy’s arm to the point that necrosis would have taken place within the hour. And that was if the spasms didn’t literally tear apart the limb from the inside out in that time.

That, or just tweak the nerves enough to make his arm spasm so hard that would blow itself up. A gruesome trick, but useful one when you needed to make an example out of an idiot.

“You brat!” The man roared and began to gather magic in his free hand…

“So help me someone deal with the moron before I bucket him! Literally! With this buooooghtnghtalkdhf!”

“I believe that is enough, honored guest.” Grayfia firmly grabbed the Devil’s hand and pushed it down while Issei returned to more or less practicing bulimia. “I apologize for his behavior and my intrusion, however I am obligated to take action to avoid escalating the situation. Please, allow me to escort you to some medics we have in the facility. They should be capable of treating your condition.”

“You-” The Lord glared at Grayfia and started to make an argument…

And that was as far as he got before her tight on his non injured wrist tightened noticeably, and painfully if the sound of creaking bones was any indication.

“I *insist*, honored guest.” Her tone grew only slightly harder.

And that was when he remembered that Grayfia was, despite being a maid, one of the most powerful Devils in the underworld.

“Ngh. F-fine. But this isn’t over…”

“Stand down, you child.”

Another voice snarled from the crowd, this time a surly older looking devil woman with dark hair, deep wrinkles, and a hawk-like glare.

Her appearance alone meant much if the way the other guests parted away from her like she was Moses.

“Dame Purson.” Grayfia coolly greeted the woman.

“I should have seen it from the start.” The woman completely ignored the maid and looked down at Issei. “That boy was always too stubborn to follow simple logic. He can’t even die properly. Or was that all part of your plan, Lucifer?”

“You flatter me, Dame Purson.” Sirzechs nodded to one of the oldest leaders of the 72 pillars. “Planning for this sort of chaos takes a gift that I sadly don’t practice.”

“Humph. I suppose you don’t.” She never looked away from Issei. “That overwhelming aura. A fire that is on par with Sirzech’s Destruction. An obnoxious vocabulary. And an irregular ability and use of white magic. If it wasn’t for whatever peculiar magic you have set up to hide your existence, I would have recognized you the moment you opened your mouth. I should have known you were still alive. Sekiryuutei.”

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It was like something clicked in everyone’s minds at once the moment she uttered the title.

“Sekiryuutei?”

“That brat? Him?”

“Is she serious?”

“Wait, wasn’t he supposed to be a child back then?”

“You mean the monster that immolated the Bael territory’s still around? Didn’t the Maou tell everyone they had killed him?”

“What on earth is going on?”

“That bastard killed my brother!”

Sona grimaced as the whispers around her gained traction quickly. She had her suspicions, but like Rias she correctly believed that opening that pandora’s box was something that they neither desired nor were prepared for.

She could almost feel the deep windings of the spell that hid Issei away from the world slowly unwinding. Serafall had told her that the magic was a modified variant of a peculiar old scandinavian curse used to banish the unwanted, or force loners to realize the importance of interacting with others. It was ironically a spell based on “intimacy”, where increased interactions and connections between the target and others would weaken the effect. The stronger personal relations the target had with an individual, the weaker the effect would be. Likewise, the more isolated the target was, the easier it was to ignore their existence as a whole.

That said, the spell had been tweaked to ensure that those that already had strong relationships with him were not affected nearly as much, or at all, but that was a double edged sword in many ways.

Really, had Issei not caused so much destruction and chaos those years ago, most likely wouldn’t have paid any mind to the existence of the Sekiryuutei by now.

It wasn’t gone. A spell that could affect the entirety of society couldn’t be that weak. However its immediate effects were weakened. For now at least.

“This won’t end well.” Sairaorg’s expression was not much different than her own.

“You knew?” She asked before shaking her head. “Who am I kidding? Of course you did. What’s more bizarre is that Riser of all people knew him.”

“S-sekiryuutei?” Gasper paled and began to shiver. “S-sempai is *that* Sekiryuutei?”

The vampire’s fear shouldn’t be that surprising. Issei was more or less single handedly the most recent major international disaster in the underworld. Talking about the Sekiryuutei in standard society was literally akin to talking about a cross between the 2008 market crash and Hurricane Katrina.

“Looks like it.” Kiba frowned, his hands tightened into fists and he looked around warily. He wasn’t too keen on the devolving situation regarding the crowd, much less his own feelings on Issei’s identity for that matter. Not so much that Issei was supposedly a mass murdering disaster, but because he really was *that* much stronger than Kiba.

“The perv, is *that* monster?” Koneko on the other hand, seemed to be uncharacteristically stunned by the revelation. “But… the Sekiyruutei was brought up around nee-san… and she was blamed for something that led to what happened…”

Sairaorg frowned and knelt down to the girl, grabbing her shoulders and snapping her out of her funk. Even on his knees he was at least a full head taller than the rook. “Calm down. You’re the black cat’s sister, right?”

Her suddenly rigid body was enough of an answer.

“There’s a lot that happened you don’t know, and even more… inaccurate stories that are flying around because of it.” The large young man grimaced, picking his words very carefully. There were many people around and there was no telling who was listening. “It’s best to talk to a credible source before making any final decisions.”

“Oh my.” Akeno hummed and tilted her head to the side, the least affected by the news out of the group. “I for one am merely surprised that such a notable individual is such an openly lewd degenerate as Issei. It’s difficult to imagine two extremes in the same individual like that.”

Issei probably would have shouted something about how being near hypocrisy made him nauseous, but he was too busy being sick to articulate anything.

“What on earth is he doing here though? He despises crowded venues like this to put it mildly.” Sona grimaced. As supposedly attached to Rias as he was, she knew that it wasn’t enough to convince the insane teen to an event he had no interest in and be the center of attention, which he hated on principle.

“I would say unfinished business, but even that wouldn’t be enough to convince him to do something like this. Something else got under his skin, and I don’t think it’s the Maou..” Sairaorg frowned, trying to examine his friend’s body language for any clue.

For the briefest of moments, Issei made eye contact with him.

*A colossal dragon peered down upon a massive demonic lion that had yet to match its peer’s size and intensity.*

*The Lion was about to speak when the Dragon cut it off.*

*“Don’t.”*

He blinked a few times, returning to reality with an unexpected jolt.

“Sairaorg?” Sona didn’t miss his moment of absence.

“It’s nothing.” He shook his head, lamenting the missed opportunity to have a private conversation. Issei clearly had made up his mind, and was going to go through with whatever insane plot he had conjured with Sirzechs. “Whatever his motivation is, I don’t think tonight will end quietly.”

“I thought you knew him.” Sona snarked sarcastically.

“I thought you knew what he’s like when he actually *tries* to make a mess.” Sairaorg grimaced.

“There’s safety in ignorance. I refuse to fall for his nonsense.”

The pair pretended to not notice the very brief look of annoyance Issei gave them over his shoulder.

“Lucifer! An explanation would be appreciated as to why the boy is still alive despite his crimes.” Dame Purson demanded as though she was his superior, no doubt a performance resulting from centuries of being one of Devilkind’s leading nobles.

Sirzechs sighed and shook his head. “I assume you mean other than being the primary reason why the Dragons have refrained from declaring all out war upon us?”

The crowd’s chattering dampened immediately at that reminder. Many territories had been razed and mutilated by the rampaging monsters, but despite their rare collaborated agreement to make the three main factions suffer if not miserable, a coordinated declaration of war was never made.

It had been close, and many had feared it would come to it, but it never passed.

“Humph. So Tiamat is aware. I suspected as much.”

“Can we *please* not talk about her!?” Issei shouted with a face pallor between ghost white and sick green, shivered, and then puked some more.

Other than a few confused looks from those that didn’t have the proper context, nobody acknowledged his outburst.

“Despite the popular consensus of our society, our guest here does have some individuals of particular note that would be rather irate with us, all of us, should he depart before his intended time. Or at least, before he accomplishes certain expected feats and tasks that were otherwise thought impossible. Individuals that can and would cause the entirety of our society more tragedy than the assault of a single territory.”

It didn’t take superhearing for Ophis’ name to be whispered and heard after a grand total of five seconds.

“As for why he is with us tonight, that is a more simple topic to explain.” Sirzechs continued. “After all, my dear sister was not the only one disappointed by the results of such a dishonest and disadvantageous battle. Not when both sides had been trained by the same individual.”

The room went dead silent once again as Riser and Rias turned to one another in silent accusation, betrayal, and disbelief.

“*You* were trained by him?” Rias balked at the mere idea of Issei and Riser working together on anything..

“Riser knew something was amiss. There was no feasible way *those two reprobates* were capable of teaching anyone those tactics in such a short period of time.” Riser on the other hand groaned and held his forehead to stave off a strong headache.

Both Rias and Sirzechs momentarily frowned at the oddly specific admission, but didn’t press the topic. It wasn’t the time for it.

“With all due respect Lord Maou, where are you going with this?” Ravel asked warily. She knew the man was leading up to something they wouldn’t like. “Despite the controversies surrounding our performance during the Rating Game, the conclusion was still clear. Your sister lost and has to abide by the terms she agreed to.”

Sirzech’s lips twitched in minor amusement, and everyone knew the shoe was about to drop.

“My sister may have lost the game, correct. However, upon further investigation of the event, it was determined, and agreed upon by an impartial panel that your brother does satisfy the minimum qualifications for being an Ultimate class combatant.”

The stage went silent as the implications slowly sunk in.

“... Tch.”

Riser allowed himself to click his teeth and throw the Maou a dirty glare without shame.

The Dame snorted. “So this was the angle you were hoping for.”

Rating games were taken very seriously by Devil society. Official or not. As such, there were certain rules that were put in place to ensure to the populace that a certain standard and veil of fairness was followed.

One of which was that Ultimate Class devils were NOT allowed to fight individuals or groups of a lesser strength tier unless the latter party had proven themselves capable enough to do so as a form of promotion exam or officially regulated event.

In contrast, Rias’ peerage wasn’t even supposed to be in Rating Games at all yet. They were clearly talented as everyone had witnessed, but certainly not enough to handle an opponent of that caliber.

In short, Sirzech’s had just claimed that Riser’s victory over Rias had been null and void in front of a live audience.

Issei wouldn’t be surprised if the Maou barely managed to get the documentation passed and stamped this morning. Pushing an Ultimate class registration through the works was not an easy or fast task.

“This, this shouldn’t matter. Even if my brother really was that powerful.” Ravel, surprisingly, was the one that seemed to be panicking the most. There was clearly something else going on behind the scenes that required investigation. “It wasn’t an official match.”

“I believe the general populace will see it otherwise.” Sirzechs calmly pointed out the flaw in that argument while blatantly ignoring his sister’s look of hope. “However, given the circumstances, we have managed to conjure a suitable substitute competition for tonight that can satisfy any qualms.”

“No.” Riser flat out denied the suggestion before hearing it. “No. Absolutely not, Lucifer. Riser refuses to be a martyr. Riser still desires to live, and not die horrifically.”

“Chicken!” Issei shouted before chuckling and swaying side to side. “Hah. Get it? Because bird person, and bird, and Colonel Sanders. Hurp.”

The Lucifer held back a sigh and turned to Issei once more facialling himself with the bucket. “I didn’t know your Sacred Gear’s peculiar quirk extended to your stomach Issei.”

“Do you have any idea how much I have to down in order to get a strong enough buzz to just get in this room? Let alone keep it going to tolerate being in here? You know what my constitution is like, Zechs.”

“Wouldn’t that insinuate that your body would burn through the alcohol rather than retain it?”

“Fuck you that’s how. I’m already pissed at the floor for not staying still.” Judging from the way he was cradling the bucket, he was probably telling the truth.

“You fool! You have already fallen for its trap! There is no escape!” A hysterically insane voice shouted from outside the building.

“What was-?”

“Don’t!” Rias started to ask before she was cut off by Sirzechs, Raiser, Ravel, Grayfia, Yuballuna, and Sairaorg, all looking slightly panicked.

“Tch, not even ten minutes and your madness is already encroaching on this place.” Raiser glared at Issei.

“Oi oi. You know damn well I have no control over *that* nutjob.” The teen grimaced.

Ghost was a lot to handle on a good day, but his brother… it was fortunate that that one rarely ever showed up as a random joke.

The one time he had been more than that was, haunting.

“Speaking of insufferable madmen.” Raiser eyed Issei’s bandaged right arm. “I’m surprised your other tenant hasn’t said anything as of yet. He’s worse than you are. In more than one way.”

“He’s taking a nap.” It was a blank and empty response that everyone could tell was nowhere near the full truth of the matter.

“A nap? While Riser suffers this humiliation? Don’t tell Riser you finally gave in to his shameless requests to muzzle that monster.”

Issei groaned, rolling his eyes and knowing exactly what was going on.

The less they spoke about Ghost the better. High level Presence users were always aware of when someone spoke about them, even when asleep. It was the reason why they sometimes shouted off randomly at people that weren’t there. They could actually hear when people badmouth them in completely different universes in some cases.

He should know. Until Azazel set up the spell that hid his existence from the world, he could at best manage ten minute naps before the background echoes of conversation woke him up again.

It also wasn’t until *after* the spell was set up that he realized what Snowball had done to his psyche.

Fuck. He really didn’t think this disaster through.

“For the love of- Bird Person! Quit stalling to figure out a way to get out of this you useless cuck! This is, what, the third time that someone you set your sights on likes me more? Grow a pair for once!”

Riser twitched.

“First it was nee-san. Then it was the shitshow that was Snowball. And now it’s the Weeb? This is getting ridiculous. And don’t even get me started on how I had to hold your hand so you could *finally* manage to satisfy Bella-nee. I refuse to be the source of a half baked NTR plot because of your incompetence!”

“Of course he went there. His twisted logic hasn’t changed in the slightest.” Sairaorg facepalmed and silently apologized to the literally stunned silent Rias who was blushing a hue close to her hair color. Judging from the sound of palm-meeting-face next to him, he wasn’t the only one that felt the same.

“Oh my.” Akeno blushed, looking far more eager than she should. Her mind was flying a hundred miles a minute to the point that she, very briefly, contemplated seducing Riser for said potential half baked NTR plot.

Both Issei and Raiser unconsciously shivered for reasons neither could explain.

“Did he have to bring that up?” Yuballuna blushed a fluorescent red, ignoring the looks she was getting from the audience. She was going to be hounded about how she was “satisfied” by the Sekiryutei for months if she somehow lived through this disaster.

“Riser doesn’t know what infuriates him more, your mindless rambling, or the idea that you remotely presume that it will goad Raiser to actually agree to this sham. Riser thought you didn’t do “snuff films”.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Barring your questionable tastes at the best of times, this is still a ridiculous demand, Lucifer.” Raiser turned to the Maou. “The last Raiser recalled, the only individuals that have a logistical hope of combatting the Sekiryuutei in a one on one fight, let alone lasting longer than three minutes, are widely considered the most powerful or versatile entities in the world according to yourself and the Governor General of the Fallen. By your admission and our standards, he falls into the “Super Devil” power classification. The same as *you*. The restrictions on their activity are even more restrained than those of the Ultimate class.”

Many Devils in the room were ominously quiet as they listened with rapt attention. It wasn’t everyday that one heard prime gossip of this quality. Having Sirzechs and Azazel being quoted to agree on something of this matter was a rare and surprising turn of events. The fact that Raiser sounded as though he had been in the room when they said it more so.

They pointedly tried to ignore the fact that the supposed Super Devil tiered individual was still sitting on the floor and wrapped around an industrial bucket of vomit.

“Humility doesn’t suit you, Raiser. You sound as though you only know of Issei’s abilities from second hand sources and rumors.” Sirzechs scoffed. “No, should you agree to it, your bout would come with several handicaps in your favor to make it… fair.”

Nobody missed how much rare pity the Maou placed in that final word. It almost sounded like he felt bad for the Phoenix.

“Raiser supposes one of them would prevent him from using those damn phones?”

“HA!” Issei laughed loudly before his cheeks bulged and he threw up again. “Oh god it hurts to laugh!”

The entire audience tolerated the momentary mention of the biblical god and the unexpected spike of pain in their skulls.

“What I mean is you are allowed to fight with your entire peerage supporting you at once if desired. Issei will fight you alone with the following stipulations: no Balance Breaker, no fire, no Presence, no Blind Eternity, no use of any of his stored items, or items that would be stored for that matter in case he tries to get around it…” Sirzechs started to list off the things Issei wasn’t allowed to do. During which Riser had not sounded convinced or impressed.

“What of Ascalon?” The Phoenix interrupted. “Do not presume the holy dragon slaying blade gifted to him by Heaven is overlooked.”

“He has a *what*?” Rias’ knight voiced his thoughts on the matter with a pure kneejerk reaction. Fortunately it was ignored as the audience was just as surprised that the Sekiryuutei had the famous weapon as he was.

“Ascalon counts as a part of his treasury. Rest assured, Issei has not become a practitioner of the blade, outside of his usual peculiar hobbies.” Sirzechs amended his earlier statements.

Sword Fighting porn. It was a stupid, stupid thing that somehow still existed. And because of it, Issei had to of course dive into it head first with reckless abandon.

Fucking hentai bullshit.

Issei pretended to ignore the small number of accusing glares sent his way by those that knew what Sirzechs was referring to.

He regretted nothing and that was the story he was sticking to.

“As with the bucket.”

“Oh come on!”

“For once, you have Riser’s gratitude.”

“Were you thinking about using it?”

“... No?”

“Riser is relieved that your ability to lie remains consistent.”

“Funny how you say that *now*.”

“...”

Fortunately, Sirzechs managed to get them back on track. “And, to conclude the list of restrictions, he will start the fight with a completely empty stock.”

That got a surprised reaction not only from him but from Yubelluna, Ravel and Sairaorg as well.

“An *emptied stock*?” Riser parroted in disbelief before giving Issei a look to see if this was true.

Judging from the completely indifferent glazed look that the teen gave back while wiping his mouth with a napkin that he had pulled out from nowhere, this was not information that interested him in the slightest.

“Is he serious?” Yuballuna swallowed heavily and began to think hard about their odds. Issei was still very talented in white magic and a Ki user, but with an emptied stock alongside those other restrictions…

Rias and several others in the audience noticed the reaction to the last stipulation and knew it indicated something big. They all clearly wanted to ask what Sirzechs meant, but to interrupt the intense conversation would likely ruin the odds of ever finding out.

Riser was visibly tempted by those conditions if his body language was any indication. He was clearly at war with himself for more than a few seconds before shaking his head. “No. No. Forget it Lucifer. You have yet to tell Riser what the catch is and it still isn’t enough. Riser won’t do it. You can’t force me-”

“Then someone else will.” Issei’s almost casual reply did nothing to lessen the cold dread filled his veins.

Sirzechs slightly frowned at the interruption. He had asked Issei to let him take care of convincing Riser to go through with the battle, if only to increase the odds of it happening and to take attention off of the disturbed teen.

For Issei to step in regardless did not indicate anything that would end quietly.

“Oh?” Riser turned and pretended to remain confident. “And here Riser was convinced your negotiating skills had remained as deplorable as ever.”

“Fuck negotiations. I got blackmail, logic, and porn.”

“How comforting.” He was wondering when Issei would pointlessly bring porn into the conversation.

“Better than drugging and backstabbing you useless cuck.”

“... Get to the point you child.”

Issei tilted his head to the side with an unreadable blank expression.

“I believe upping the stakes on both sides will make things more enticing and interesting for everyone. What is a party without a good show after all.”

Slowly the teen stood up, swaying slightly, but managing to get back on his two feet.

“Whatever happens between you and the Weeb stays, but on top of that, if I win you have to take a recorded interview and answer a list of certain questions under the influence of the Confessional Buddhist Array of Four Truths and spreading it to every damn corner of the underworld. No hiding behind nobility clauses and paper thin excuses like a pissant this time.”

There was a rise of whispers and uncomfortable mutterings in the audience. When it came to trials and the like, spells and rituals that forced the truth out of others were usually destained and looked down upon. Especially by nobility. In politics this was even less effective due to the way facts could be and were misinterpreted by the talented and trained.

The fact that most of these methods did not mesh well with the chaotic nature of Devils in general did not make it even more enticing.

The Confessional Buddhist Array of Four Truths though was a nasty piece of work that not only forced “the truth” but “proper context” out of the confessor, regardless of origin.

The consequences of still trying to lie or mislead under the array though was literal suffering. True, absolute, unequivocal, conceptual suffering. In its *entirety*. Buddhism was big on that sort of thing.

“You are not making a convincing proposition, fool. What could you possibly possess that would make it worth risking Riser’s life to directly confront you?” Riser tried to hide it, but he was starting to get nervous. Issei wasn’t an idiot. Insane, yes, but not stupid. This was an insanely high stake to request, and only the reckless or blindly overconfident would ever ignore that hanging over their head. Which begged the question again, what would be worth taking such a risk in the first place?

Issei smiled.

A twisted, horrible, out of place and flat out *wrong* smile that made everyone that saw it fidget unconsciously to one extent or another.

“Myself.”

The room was ominously quiet.

“...”

“...”

“What?” The flat response was unanimous from all sides in this disaster.

“Weeb’s nowhere near strong enough to do it conventionally, but she has all her pawn pieces still open. So long as I don’t fight it and don’t go overboard, I could fill the role if I take all of them in at once. Giving her the Sekiryuutei would be one hell of an engagement gift, wouldn’t it?”

Riser wasn’t the only one that was caught completely flat footed by the offer. Rias and even Sirzechs were completely gaping at the new insanity Issei had just conjured.

“This is… a poor jest, even by your petty standards.” Riser’s patience began to wane and his temper rose. “How would having *you* near me for any period or duration be in my benefit?! World power or not, it would do nothing but bring Riser disaster and an early demise even if you were on my side!”

“Oh?”

Issei’s twisted smile only widened as he lifted his left arm.

“Even with the benefits, resources, and *knowledge* I have?”

The Phoenix froze and his voice caught in his throat. He knew exactly what Issei was alluding to, and if that was the case…

High above his head, Issei’s hand flicked, and for the briefest of instants, his entire forearm was encompassed by a crimson gauntlet that barely anyone managed to perceive the existence of before it vanished again.

In his hand though was now a vial with a sky blue substance that had not been there before.

Riser’s eyes dilated and his face went pale, as he instantly deduced what the concoction was.

Oh.

*Oh shit*.

“That color… you don’t think…”

Riser’s eyes flickered to the audience, and for the first time he noticed who was in it.

On top of Dame Purson, there were other familiar faces that he certainly did not expect, including Salaia Berith and her husband Alac, along with several other faces he had not seen in years.

Faces that had belonged to sponsors for Ars Nova’s original projects, when it had still been under Issei’s and Jasmine’s name.

Faces that knew exactly what Issei was capable of, what they had been promised, what had yet to be delivered, and what was currently in Issei’s hand.

Riser didn’t invite them. And he doubted Rias was responsible for their invitations either.

This had been planned.

Issei didn’t lie. And when he called someone’s bluff, he did it with the truth.

This was not going to end well. Not at *all*.

“It didn’t take long to finally finish this. But you probably knew that.” The boy clearly reveled in the moment of sadism while monologuing. “I wonder what everyone would think if you passed up on the opportunity to finally get your hands on something so, *valuable*, to society.”

He was playing with him. With everyone there. Dancing around the topic in particular to see him sweat and raise interest in the drug.

And it was working.

Because the moment he let loose what the drug was, and the story behind it, heads would roll. Including Risers, immortal flame regeneration and nobility be damned.

Riser genuinely didn’t want to fight Issei or call off the wedding. Politically, even with Sirzechs’ maneuvers, Riser could still play a few games and call some favors of his own to eventually work around his difficult position. Had Issei not been present, he’d probably have been able to push through with the engagement party’s events regardless and deal with the consequences later with a bit of work and a minor smudge on his reputation that would eventually go away.

But he literally couldn’t afford to *not* fight Issei now. The disaster the boy could spring with but a few words would and could literally spawn a civil war among Devil society with Riser as one of the first casualties, if not the prime targets, of the revolting side.

A brief look at his so called “conspirators” in the audience had all but abandoned him if the greedy and hungry look in their eyes was any indication. At one point they had been on the same side, but he had absolutely no doubt what they would say if his fate were up to them right now.

His only hope of a safe way out of this mess, was to win. There was no other path available to him.

He didn’t even try to hide his hands shaking in absolute terror. There was no point.

“I told you, it only took us six months to-”

“Enough. You’ve made your point.” Raiser cut him off with a curt and blunt tone with a disgusted tone to match. He turned to Sirzechs, who to his credit didn’t seem to be taking the revelation any better if his slight frown was any indication. “What is the caveat for all these handicaps. Riser is allowed to bring his full peerage, correct?”

“Brother? You’re serious?” Ravel paled at what he was committing himself to.

“Quiet Ravel. This is not your venue to speak.” He cut her off. The less notable she was in this disaster, the better.

The Maou nodded. “You are allowed fifteen minutes to strategize, and once the fight begins, a five minute grace period for positioning and field preparation.”

Five minutes. That was far too much time for someone like Issei to play and work with.

“Two, no, ninety seconds. Riser won’t agree to anything more than that.”

Sirzechs paused momentarily to gauge what Issei’s reaction was, only to be met with virtually nothing. A blank and uninterested blink at best. It was the sort of look a person had when they were practically asleep with their eyes open.

Riser grit his teeth and clenched his fist. The fight hadn’t even started yet and he was already being dismissed.

No Presence. No Fire. No Balance Breaker. No tools. No Blind Eternity. And an empty stock.

That just left the Boosted Gear, Ki, and his magic alongside his impressive, yet still human physique.

… And his sharp teeth. Couldn’t forget that the fool was a biter. Riser doubted that much had changed over the years either.

If it was that much…

“Very well. It is agreed upon then. There will be a fifteen minute-”

CRASH!

“Ghaaaaaa?! Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck its going up my pants leg gross gross gross fuck!”

Sirzechs paused as Issei accidentally tripped over his vomit bucket and was now his lower half was soaked in his own bile much to his and everyone else’s visible disgust.

“...”

“...”

“... Half an hour recess.” The Maou seamlessly corrected himself, “After which you will be teleported to the premises' private Rating Game dueling ground. Once the battle commences, there will be ninety seconds for both sides for non-combat field preparations before you may engage. Are there any questions?”

“Why is there corn!? I did not have any corn!!”

“Please tell Riser that his room will be sound proofed, if only for the sake of literally everyone here.”

“... It can be arranged.”

o. o. o.

“Riser-sama, what on earth is-” His knight Karlamine all but demanded when the entirety of the peerage warped into the waiting room with all their equipment on.

“We’re using Icarus the moment the fight starts.” Riser didn’t let her finish, his tone cold and final.

The entirety of his peerage save for Ravel and Yuballuna gasped in surprise.

They couldn’t be blamed for it. Icarus was their strongest single group attack, designed to do as much damage and destruction as possible in a single go.

The sort of damage that would not be legal to use under normal circumstances in a Rating Game.

Or in wartime.

“You’re serious?!” Xuelan balked. “We’re using our strongest secret move against that clown?”

“That *clown* was capable of fighting the four Maou, Michael, and Azazel at the same time to a standstill when he was barely *thirteen*.” Riser growled. “While simultaneously maintaining the disaster that immolated an entire major Devil territory. Under the current circumstances, we are fighting him while he is the equivalent of blindfolded, one armed, one legged, and barely able to wield a tenth of the power at his disposal. Would you feel confident had you been told you’d be facing any of the Maou with those benefits?”

The Rook opened her mouth momentarily to answer before grimacing and retracting her opinion.

“If he’s that scary, then why are you going through with this in the first place?” Burent huffed. “What was that vial he was waving in front of everyone that had you so scared?”

“It’s best you don’t know. For your own safety.” Yuballuna cut in before Riser could answer. “Rather, we’d be better off preparing strategies to fight him. Just in case.”

Ravel shifted in her place and avoided looking at anyone. “I… I really don’t want to fight him. You saw the way he reacted and said… that word. Something in Issei is broken now. He’s right to be angry after what happened.”

Riser twisted his face as he recalled the way Issei had said the word Harem.

It was wrong. It was beyond wrong, especially coming from that person in particular. Just remembering how twisted that seemingly stupid and immature goal of Issei’s had become sent genuine chills down the Devil’s spine.

But, no matter how horrific it was, Riser knew there was nothing he could do about it now.

“It is not our place to address his madness, Ravel. Especially not now.” His words did hold a hint of regret, but were also reluctant finality. “The best we can do is face it head on. For what it is worth, Riser is sorry he had to drag you into this.”

 He turned to the rest of his Peerage. “Riser hopes he doesn’t have to underscore this, but do not under any circumstances utter or refer to harems in the Sekiryuutei’s presence. Regardless of what temporary advantage you may believe it may grant us, should he decide to forego his handicaps, it would all but assure the deaths of more than one of us. At the bare minimum.”

“And with his handicaps, nya?” Ni asked curiously.

“He’s a Ki user.” He looked at his nekomata pawns with a slightly guilty look. “In fact, he is indirectly the reason why Ars Nova sought you two out, and placed you under my care.”

The two cat girls froze and went rigid, their eyes dilated while their minds traveled to places they’d rather not go to. Within seconds they were holding onto one another for support much to the surprise of those that didn’t know of the ordeals they had gone through.

“Y-you mean those super complicated experiments infusing Ki to develop chemicals they tried to myake us recreate over and over again were hyis?” Li shivered.

“Th-they wouldn’t let us out of that room for months.” Ni almost teared up. “We told them that they nyeeded someone wis Senjutsu training or a Ki master to make what they wanted, but they would nyat listen. We were self taught.”

“He’s not a Senjutsu user, but, I doubt that there are many that know more of its secrets and intricacies than he does.” Ravel supplemented. “Issei is extremely… intense and meticulous about topics that catch his interest. He’s far more intelligent than what his behavior would suggest. Terrifyingly so.”

“Issei Hyoudou, is an anomaly that literally and perpetually defies logic on his constant selfish whims. I have yet to witness anyone that has underestimated him and not suffered severe and traumatizing consequences, regardless of station or pedigree.” Yuballuna sighed. “When Lord Sirzechs claimed he was a battle medic, he refrained from mentioning that Issei was the individual that single handedly *made* the combat style prominent in the first place. Without proper warning or preparation, he is capable of rendering anyone unconscious or even killing them with a passing touch, regardless of how powerful they may be. Even the Maou are wary of carelessly coming in direct contact with him. And that is without the aid of the Boosted Gear.”

In fact, the only major leaders of the factions that he recalled weren’t hesitant to touching the Sekiryuutei were Serafall and Gabriel… because usually the first thing he did whenever they were around back then was essentially tackle hug them so that his head was between their breasts.

… Lucky little bastard. Enemy leader or not, nobody could deny Gabriel’s beauty. Or her chest.

Riser closed his eyes and getting his mind back on track, reviewing what he knew. “Without his fire, his ranged options are near nonexistent. Without his tools, he won’t plague us with any excess surprises or headaches. Without his Presence, he won’t twist or alter his existence to overwhelm and ignore what we throw at him. Without his Balance Breaker, he will have to fight us one at a time. Without his second Sacred Gear, he won’t be able to cheat reality in the case we do have the advantage. And with an empty stock… his very existence can be defined as something that can be dealt with.”

“An empty stock?” Several of the girls aksed.

“It’s how his Boosted Gear works. It’s a subspecies.” Ravel clarified with a small shiver. “And his mastery of it is the reason why he’s considered one of if not the most dangerous Sekiryuutei to ever possess the Boosted Gear.”

“His current arsenal consists of his use of Ki, his limited but exceptional use of magic, which he primarily leans towards white and lightning, and his restricted use of his Boosted Gear.” Riser sat down in his chair and breathed out slowly to calm himself down. He could do this. If it was just this much, it was possible.

“Listen carefully. Do not approach this like we did with my betrothed. If there ever was a time to not hold back or hide our abilities it will be now. Our opponent is one like you have never encountered before, nor ever will for that matter. Common sense and conventional logic does not apply to him. In the case that Icarus fails for whatever reason, Riser will inform you of each and every method available to circumvent the tactics and methods your enemy has available and will most likely utilize. Failure to do so will almost guarantee him dispatching any one of you with but a touch. One way or another. ”

It didn’t take him long for the uninformed of his peerage to realize just how absurd their opponent was.

 o. o. o.

“Hopefully everything is in order?” Sirzechs asked Grayfia as she entered the private viewing room where he, Rias and her Peerage and Sona were waiting while a magical screen roughly the size of one of the walls was in front of them. The party guests were watching the same feed from the main hall, although there were a few elite members that had their own parlors to watch from.

“As much as it can be.” The maid nodded, closing the door behind her.

She refrained from mentioning Issei’s long shower that took up most of his time, and his grumblings about “showerhead conspiracies”, as she didn’t see anything important about it.

Nor did she dare comment on the minor panic attack he had in the chambers shortly after they entered the room that she had to talk him down from before he took said shower. Fortunately his short lived intoxicated state had prevented the party guests from witnessing the Sekiryuutei curl up into a ball and shake violently for a solid five minutes.

She probably should mention the supposed anti-anxiety pills he had shoved down his throat though. She wasn’t a doctor, but she had never seen a prescription that required over a dozen supplements to be taken at once. Dragon disposition or not.

She was a bit disappointed that he didn’t rely on those things before the party, but according to Ddraig, they were good at calming him down, but not so much at keeping him level.

That and mixing the pills with the copious amounts of alcohol he drank earlier would have been a bad idea regardless. He could take the pills now since he threw up pretty much all of the drink, but still it was a pretty dangerous and stupid thing to do normally.

“Fortunately, the effects of the alcohol managed to last until Issei left the main hall. I suspect outside of cleaning himself, he was attending to the lingering aftereffects he had placed his mind and body under, as well as managing the contained insecure impulses he managed to restrain in front of everyone. Regardless of what happens, I highly advise against putting him in the main hall again.”

“I have myself to blame. I didn’t think he would or need to go to such lengths just to tolerate being in the same room as so many people.” Sirzechs shook his head before the slightest frown marred his face. “Nor did I expect him to bring such a controversial substance with him.”

He didn’t know the young man had finished it in the first place. Sirzechs could have done so much with that information had he been informed ahead of time, but that would have insinuated that Issei still trusted him implicitly.

As much as he hated to admit it, after the disaster five years ago, he didn’t blame the Sekiryuutei for hiding such a card so close to his chest. He probably would have done the same thing.

“I was unaware of it as well until he started to… *converse* with a few certain individuals at the event.” Grayfia admitted.

“I see. That explains his peculiar request.” It hadn’t been the Maou’s or Grayfia’s plan to invite the former and current sponsors of the Ars Nova group, but Issei’s, and now it was more than obvious why. Of those invited, roughly two thirds had shown up from what Sirzechs could tell.

With Issei flashing the completed fertilization drug in front of all their faces, the very thing that Carnelian had not only stolen the rights to, but failed to produce for half a decade, failed to provide them the benefits of the product and the subsequent massive profits, there was bound to be discontent among the ranks. Moves would be made, and the desperate will no doubt make themselves known from the crowd of the greedy.

It was a crude and brutal tactic, but at the end of the day, when you’re dying of thirst in the middle of the desert, the guy that has water may as well be God.

And as shown, Issei had more than enough reason to be one of the old testament variety.

Speaking of which, those that said “god” had been unexpectedly aiding this night had oddly enough yet to voice their thanks. Or say much of anything for that matter.

Indeed, other than a few words of comfort and a few minor questions, Rias’s group had been uncomfortably silent as they digested the current circumstances.

Although…

“Have you seen my cousin?” Sirzechs probed quietly.

Grayfia frowned slightly and shook her head. “I presumed Sairaorg would be with you given the circumstances.”

“No. And Riser has requested to not be disturbed at all until the fight was to begin.” Sirzechs didn’t like it. Sairaorg wasn’t exactly a loose end, but he wasn’t uninvolved either. If anything he pitied his cousin for being in almost a worse position than Issei. “... Leave him. If he does not desire to be found, then he must have a reason. You know how delicate his position is.”

“Another task that will need to be addressed soon, for his sake.” She agreed with a brief sorrowful look before once more becoming indifferent and looking at the screen displaying a large open stone tiled arena with large spires in the background. “I should prepare. It’s almost time.”

“Please.” They couldn’t afford to screw up now. Spells and security ensured the privacy of this battle. And the medical facility that the defeated were teleported to even more so just in case.

It was finally time to turn things around.

For a moment, he felt as though he was on the cusp of fighting in the civil war all over again.

Fortunately, he had experience waiting and watching on the sidelines for these sorts of events.

Only instead of Ajuka about to tear the world apart like a natural disaster, it would be Issei.

He wasn’t particularly certain who he pitied more to be honest.

“How is Rias?” His wife asked just before leaving, bringing him back from his nightmarish reminiscing.

 “Quiet.” He admitted looking at his beautiful, if a bit garishly overdressed sister. Truly Riser deserved to be taken down a few pegs for just that alone. “Go on ahead. I’ll see to this.”

“Very well.”

Sirzechs dismissed his wife and turned his attention to his adorable little sister. “You’ve been quiet, Rias. I thought you would be more excited about this turn of events.”

“Am I excited to see that ass Riser get his upandcommance? Without question.” She replied in a clipped tone that promised nothing good. “However, that is unfortunately buried under the frustration I feel right now brother. Tell me, who was the bait in this convoluted plot? Me? Issei? The fact that my savior and undesirable fiance have past ties is far too convenient to dismiss as coincidence.”

Ah. Rias was rather cross with him. He couldn’t help but swell with brotherly love, the urge to swoon over how adorable she was when pouting nearly overwhelmed him.

Unfortunately she had a point, and her anger was justified.

Playing games with her at this stage would only cause unnecessary rifts. Best rip off the bandage and let time heal the rest. He could tell that his sister’s Peerage and Serafall’s sister were also listening intently to what he had to say.

“Truthfully? Neither. We strongly suspect that this turn of events was the result of someone else that has been eyeing our short tempered associate for some time. And like it or not, you were simply an obstacle that needed removing. Before you make any further assumptions, it should be noted that while Issei and Riser do share a history, it is blatantly clear that the latter was not aware of the former’s true intention for you until half an hour ago. A headache he may be, and far from guiltless, but Riser is ultimately just a pawn in another’s game.”

“And who is this other person then? Another secret that we are not supposed to be aware of until it is too late?” She glared at her brother.

“You’ve already heard of her. And then some. More than I’d ever like to admit.” And wasn’t that saying something. “Issei calls her Snowball, even now, and she’s the reason why he’s the complete wreck of a human being that everyone has been trying to put back together for the past five years. Including his infamous episode at that time.”

Rias froze. The one that had assaulted *(r̶a̸p̶e̶d̸)* and framed *(c̷l̸a̷i̵m̷e̶d̸ ̵t̶o̶ ̶b̴e̵ ̶r̶a̵p̵e̸d̵ ̷b̷y̵)* Issei *(S̷e̶k̸i̷r̴y̶u̴u̶t̷e̷i̴)*.

Her mind ached as certain facts and memories strained to connect and dredge up other memories that were refusing to fall into place. She was close to putting the picture together, and it was on the tip of her tongue, but the space between the tip of her tongue and the final answer felt like it was being blocked by seran wrap. Even with his identity exposed to a greater audience, the information masking spell that the Fallen had cast over Issei was infuriatingly stubborn and refused to give way.

Had she looked at Sona at that moment, she would have noticed that her friend was making a similar face to hers.

She had already pieced together that “Issei Hyodou” was the “Sekiryuutei” weeks ago, but connecting and associating traits and facts of one to the other was still a trial to accomplish.

In a sense, she knew a equals b. And b equals c. And she managed to put together a equals c, but she is still having issues connecting a to d, e, f, and g, even though they equal c, and there was a block on h onwards even when she knew they flat out existed.

“And her actual name?” She pressed, losing her patience. She loved a good mystery, but she had her limits.

“... After tonight’s events. It will take some time for you to digest. You no doubt already have much to contemplate as is.” He avoided answering the question, continuing before his sister could snap at him. “I will tell you Rias, but you still have a role to play tonight.”

There was movement on the screen.

“You still have to crown the victor.”

o. o. o.

Riser and his Peerage expected many potential outcomes when materializing into the pocket dimension fully armed and armored, ready for combat. A hidden additional opponent. A borderline enraged or eager Sekiryuutei. Banter. Killing intent.

They didn’t expect for the Sekiryuutei (cleaned up, dressed in new and vomit free clothes with no bucket in sight) to be essentially sleeping on his feet when he appeared nearly a hundred meters away from them. There was even a snot bubble coming out of his nose.

“Wonderful.” Riser clicked his tongue, his Queen and sister sharing similar thoughts, even if they didn’t voice it.

**“Riser Phoenix. Is your Peerage ready for combat?”** Grayfia’s disembodied voice asked from above.

He stuck out his chest proudly and scoffed. “Of course.”

Not.

He doubted that anything short of a veteran grade top ranked Peerage was able of holding out against Issei. The only reason why he believed he had a chance was simply because he knew how Issei fought. He knew Issei’s tactics, strengths, and weaknesses. And he knew how to exploit them.

Whether it truly would be enough to win though… Riser had reservations, but it was too late to second guess himself now.

**“Sekiryuutei, are you ready for combat?”**

“Huh? Hujgmehthr.” Issei mumbled as his eyes slowly closed and another snot bubble started to inflate. Due to the announcer magic in the arena, everyone was able to hear him clearly despite the distance.

“...”

“...”

**“... Tiamat.”**

Pop!

“Ah?! Where?! I’m up! I’m up! Don’t let her get me! I’m violated enough as it is!”

**“Sekiryuutei, are you ready for combat?”** To her credit, Grayfia’s question didn’t alter in tone or intent in the slightest.

“Combat?” The teen blinked confused for a moment before he looked around and remembered what he was doing and immediately became lethargic again. “Oh, right. Yeah. Sure I guess. Wouldn’t be the first time I smacked Bird Person around.”

Riser pretended not to hear the discouraging comment since he half expected it by now. The bulk of his peerage, not so much.

**“Sekiryuutei, as per the agreed conditions of this match, you are restricted from using your fire, your Balance Breaker, your second Sacred Gear, your ability to use the power known as Presence along with its branching skillset, and any and all items that would be contained within your Boosted Gear save for your clothes. You are also to empty your Boosted Gear’s Stock before the match begins. Do you consent to these stated requirements?”**

“Yeah ye-yawn-ah. Sure. Let’s get this over with.” Issei yawned, already losing his motivation by the second. To him it was as if the fight had already ended and he was being held back from going home and taking a nap.

Riser frowned and narrowed his eyes to get a better look. Now that he wasn’t busy fearing for his life, he noticed the deep rings under the Sekiryuutei’s eyes. Opponent or not, Issei looked concerningly gaunt and exhausted upon close inspection.

… No. Don’t get distracted, Riser. You can’t afford to screw this up now.

**“Sekiryuutei. As per the agreement, please empty the Boosted Gear’s Stock so the Rating Game may begin. Do not utilize your Sacred Gear otherwise until my say so.”**

“Hai hai.” The teen yawned widely and lifted up his left hand so his forearm was pointing up in front of his head.

**“BOOSTED GEAR!!”**

With the Crimson Dragon Emperor's call, Issei’s infamous Sacred Gear revealed itself in its full glory in front of everyone. A blood red gauntlet materialized around his arm, adorned with a massive emerald gem at the back of his hand, with an elaborate pair of crimson and gold lined ridges that wrapped around the entirety of its length in either direction, coiling around his limb like a pair of snakes. Complete with the golden ridges at his elbow and the ebony black claws that encased his fingers, it made his arm a curious and ominous sight.

Chack chack.

With the sound of a shotgun pumping, the coiled decoration on his arm pushed up to his wrist as if it was a spring, and recoiled.

**“STOCK! EMPTY!”**

A ripple that destabilized time and space itself pulsed out from his arm and roiled out in every direction. Fortunately, it didn’t appear to do anything as it flew by.

“So, how does it feel shedding all that extra bloat?” Issei asked his hand with a faint tone of amusement, flexing his hand and wrist casually. “We’ve been sitting on that load for a while.”

**“Humph.”** The deep voice of Ddraig snorted. **“Admittedly, it does feel somewhat relieving. I may not have a body, but I do feel like a load has been taken off of my shoulders that I was unaware of. We will have to do this more often.”**

“Consider it done once we get home. Now pucker up. We got shit to do.”

**“You don't need to remind me. Your pride’s not the only one that desires restitution.”** The gem momentarily glowed malevolently. **“You have no one to blame but yourself for this outcome, Phoenix.”**

“Riser is not vain enough to bestow that responsibility onto anyone else.” The blonde demon stood tall and with the pride of someone about to die. “But neither is he one that claims responsibility for those that had their own part to play.”

**“It is far too late for you to try and pretend to have dignity. The true traitor will have her day soon enough. As far as we are concerned, you are nothing more than a tool. A well trained song bird that chirps to whoever your current owner is. There is no noble bird of flame in what you are.”**

“Oi Ddraig. Enough. I’ve been calling him a cucky cuck cuck all afternoon. You’re just beating a dead cuck at this point.” Issei chided his tenant. “Stop teasing the cuck.”

“Hypocrisy does not suit you.” Riser deadpanned.

“...”

“...”

“... Cuck.”

“Will you stop that!!??”

“Will you stop being a fucking cuck!!??” They didn’t need magic to hear that one.

“You haven’t changed in the slightest you reprehensible little mutated lizard! You’re just as immature and childish as ever!!” Had Riser been near Issei, he would have been making a very irritated yakuza-esque expression right in his face while poking him hard in the chest.

“Cuck cuck. B’cuck!”

Even in a pocket dimension, one could hear a series of groans and facepalms at Issei’s antics and immature sense of humor. Not that Riser’s inability to keep his cool underneath said treatment was any better. Really, it was almost akin to watching two children in the schoolyard having an argument.

Even if, for some, it was almost nostalgic.

**“Grayfia. Start this damn farce before the idiot starts thinking he’s actually amusing and starts using puns.”** Ironically it was Ddraig that had to play the straight man as Issei did a poor imitation of a chicken while Riser began fuming so hard that errant gouts of flames were spewing from his body.

“Oi oi, I’m not *that* far gone.” Almost immediately the teen’s slightly amused expression dropped.

“Humph.” Siris snorted as she took out her sword. “There is no pride or anything endearing about this fool in the slightest. If this is how he behaves normally, then it is no wonder why Riser-sama and others severed ties with him so effortlessly.”

“...”

Ravel all but gasped.

Yuballuna’s breath hitched.

Riser froze in genuine terror. His prior rage all but forgotten.

Issei… became completely emotionless. So much so that Riser’s Peerage could feel a dead gaze upon them.

“Siris, should we survive what comes next, we will have to discuss your lack of judgment in combat banter. Intensely.” Yuballuna swallowed heavily, never taking her eyes off of her opponent.

In spite of what anyone might say or accuse him of in the future, Riser lifted up his hand and shook his head in denial, clearly indicating he had absolutely no part in what his Knight had just said.

Issei did not respond in any way other than blink exceptionally slowly with a continent and empty dull stare.

“... Let’s get this joke over with. I’ve played enough. The longer I waste time here, the more work I’ll have piled up to cram through back home.”

The lifeless, completely apathetic tone that reached everyone’s ears was completely different from the excited, frantic, immature, and even chaotic voice they had all heard so far. It was one that felt far older, exhausted, and dismissive than anything that should belong to a human of Issei’s age.

It was a blank stare of complete and absolute indifference. The sort of empty visage one would expect on a child in the middle of a class they couldn't care less about.

“And how exactly is this worse than his mindless ranting and explosive anger?” Siris asked definitely, however her body language said otherwise as she instinctively lifted her massive sword to the ready.

She couldn’t tell why, but she felt something was terribly wrong and he should be exceptionally afraid at the moment. Chills ran down her spine, and it was only due to her training that her blade didn’t shake in her hand.

Yuballuna took out her staff and prepared for the worst. “In spite of all the rumors and his past feats, Issei has never shown interest in fighting. He only became proficient in it because he has, and I quote “better and more interesting things to waste my time on”. The faster he takes down those in his way, the faster and more time he has to do what he wants, which he normally goes straight to immediately after dealing with those that interrupt him.”

“In other words, we don’t even count as people to him now. Just minor obstacles to get rid of as soon as possible so he can get back to doing what he wants again. Chores.” Ravel summarized with a heavy swallow.

She had seen this look on Issei many times in the past, mostly right before he destroyed Vali for harassing him too much, but had never been on the receiving end of it. Truth be told, it was genuinely terrifying in a way that even his enraged state couldn’t match.

**“Very well then.”** If Grayfia witnessed what had happened and knew what Riser’s situation was, she did not pay it any notice. **“On my mark, the ninety second pre-battle phase will commence. All parties may utilize their skills and resources however they wish so long as it does not directly affect the opposing party.”**

**“Three.”**

“Remember the plan and strategies Riser has taught you. Do not deviate unless we say otherwise.”Riser ordered firmly.

**“Two.”**

Riser’s entire Peerage tensed up, ready to move as fast and hard as they could.

**“One.”**

Issei yawned widely.

*“... Sorry you gotta deal with this next bit Ddraig. I know how much you hate doing it.”*

***“As far as I’m concerned, partner, it’s worth it this time.”***

**“Match Start!”**

**“BOOST! EXPLOSION!”**

o. o. o.