Chapter 25: Oh yeah, the actual main plot’s a thing.

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.

o. o. o.

Sairaorg frowned and crossed his arms as he stood inside one of the countless guest rooms of the building where the festivities were taking place.

He did not want to watch the match between two of the people he had been closest to growing up. It hurt too much to witness what had become of their group, and he knew what the outcome would be regardless.

That said, he’d much rather be doing that than what he was committing now.

Third floor. West wing. Seventh outer guest room from the north.

Rearrange the decorative vases from left to right in terms of size.

And with that a minor hole in the security fields of the building was made that had been set up when Carnelian reorganized and changed the date for the party.

Not blatant enough to open the building up for attack or sabotage, but enough so that a small party could teleport in and out without triggering any alarms.

A crimson and ivory circle shone in the room.

And several individuals joined the large young man.

“Hmhm. For a moment I thought you wouldn’t come through.” Carnelian laughed kindly.

“We’re done after this.” Sairaorg grunted with a scowl. “I’m taking my mother and Magdaran tonight. Your threats are not worth the risk of having the world burn around us.”

“And father’s? Or Zekram’s for that matter?” She probed with an unreadable expression.

“You know those cowards are ruled by risks. Ones that will grow too great for them to disregard after tonight.”

“Not immediately, at least.” The white haired woman sighed, in a rare moment of mutual disdain with her half brother. “And Issei is quite apt at drawing attention to himself.”

She didn’t flinch as a wave of murderous intent rolled over her. Her fellow attendants not so much.

“I keep on forgetting just how shameless you are. Or is it desperation at this point?” Sairaorg all but snarled, not bothering to hide his anger. His eyes darted to one of Carnelian’s attendants before looking back at her. “In spite of every fiber of my being to let you dig your grave deeper than it already is, I’m warning you. Whatever you’ve planned this time, don’t. Turn back and go home, Carnelian. You’ve already done enough damage tonight as is. The only thing that will result in your appearance is a disaster. Issei genuinely went off on Riser earlier in front of everyone because one of Riser’s peerage merely said the word ‘Harem’, and it took Sirzechs and what looked like half a keg of alcohol coming up with a vengeance to reign Issei in.”

That had her attention. “He’s an alcoholic? With *his* disposition?”

Of course she’d only pay attention to the alcohol. “Unlikely, but it certainly looks and smells like he tried to drown himself in champagne just to tolerate being in the main hall without tearing apart anyone. One look is enough to tell he’s an absolute wreck. He has a fraction of the self control he did have as a kid. You underestimate the damage you’ve already done, Carnelian. Issei is *broken*, and for the life of me I don’t think he can ever be fixed.”

For the briefest of moments, Sairaorg saw a flicker of hesitation in Carnelian’s body language. As someone that had strived to perfect the physical body and martial arts, he could see the subtle shifts in her muscles and twitches in her neck that betrayed her indecision, before they all came to an abrupt halt…

… No doubt a result of that twisted Sacred Gear of hers kicking in again.

“I’ll take your words under consideration.”

The large young man clicked his teeth in annoyance and looked away. There was no point in talking to her when she got like this. He couldn’t bear looking her in the eyes. “... Just make sure that you keep it to just your funeral then. Don’t be surprised if I don’t attend it.”

“I thought you don’t put value in my word anymore.” Her almost whimsical reply made him pause a step before he thought better of it, and used the magic gate to leave the premises undetected.

“Was that wise, to let him go?” Her female attendant asked in a neutral tone, while her male remained impassive and uncaring.

“Sairaorg’s an honest sort. He won’t cause trouble, but he will be a convenient distraction later once the pot’s stirred. There’s only a handful of places he’d be able to run off to with my dear stepmother and half brother with the faintest hope of reliable security if he is sought after in earnest.” Carnelian assayed her concerns. “I believe you know what to do.”

“Indeed. Stay safe, my lady.” The robed woman nodded quickly before quickly leaving the room.

“Quite the dutiful one she is…” Carnelian watched the door close behind her assistant before looking at her other. “Much like yourself.”

“Ma’am.” The older male gruffly nodded.

“I’m not forcing you to come. This will be a dangerous and intense trial for everyone. And you are not known for your durability.”

“I’m already here.”

Her lips twitched ever so slightly in amusement as Grayfia’s voice announcing the start of the impromptu rating game echoed throughout the building. “... So you are.”

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The artificial dueling ground was an absolute disaster to the point of falling apart.

Literally.

Tears and sears in the magical space that held it together were visible and rampant about the stone garden and sky, revealing a kaleidoscope of indefinable colors on the other side.

In the center of the madness was a cooling molten crater at least a hundred meters in diameter, containing pockets of lava, tears in timespace, and rubble, that were shifting every other second.

And at the center of that madness was no different…

A charred arm shot pierced through the abused stone and magma to the sky like it was part of the ending to a corny horror movie.

That was until Issei clawed himself out above ground like a horrifying, scorched black zombie. The only parts of him that weren’t marred or burnt were the immaculate Sacred Gear on his left arm, and the slightly tattered wrappings on his right.

Other than his ragged and dry breathing, the normally vocal teen didn’t make a sound. On the inside however…

*“Ow.”*

Ddraig held back a sigh. **“You should have prepared and expected at least for that.”**

It had been admittedly a valiant last ditch attempt of Riser’s to force a stalemate. A maneuver that took a great deal of luck, skill, and timing to pull off.

Issei’s ability to “overboost” his targets was well known, but if the target timed it juuuust right, they could potentially utilize a portion of that quite literally overwhelming power in a final attempt to do, well, anything really.

In Riser’s case, in his heightened state, he had attempted to more or less blow himself up in (another) giant fission reaction that damn near crossed the threshold for the formation of a black hole.

In hindsight, this might have been Riser’s true backup plan to begin with once Icarus had failed. A desperate gamble to be sure, but one that did genuinely have a chance of success in spite of how outclassed he was compared to Issei. The overwhelming damage to the teen and the artificial world was proof enough of that.

The fact that the dimension remained intact was a very fortunate turn of events all things considered.

Fortunately, the Sekiryuutei’s natural resistance to fire amplified with the “meager” boosts he had granted himself earlier had been enough to keep him alive, though not unmarred.

*“Ow.”* Issei argued firmly while slowly getting back on his shaking and skinless legs.

**“I also doubted the Phoenix’s ability to accomplish the feat as well, and yet here you are. Burnt and naked. Again. And here we thought you’d make it through the incident with your clothes intact for once.”** It just went to say just how often Issei had found himself in such a twisted state if Ddraig’s unimpressed words and tone were any indication. There was absolutely no concern for his host’s burnt and brutalized condition.

*“Ow.”* The tone was slightly more pointed this time.

**“Fine.”** Ddraig sighed to the point that one could hear the dragon roll his eyes. **“Grayfia! Is this embarrassment of a duel resolved yet!?”**

There was a brief pause and a flickering in the magics and lights above the crater before a static filled voice echoed through the area. **“That is correct. Riser Phoenix has been retired from battle, and as such the victor is Issei-sama.”**

*“Ow.”* The victor mentally hissed in relief.

And then slammed his right hand against his burnt and charred chest.

*Dress Break.*

In the next second, in a flash of light, all the dried and seared skin and dust clinging to his frame, from burnt bald head to barely there toes, was magically blasted off of him, revealing open wounds, weeping muscles, and exposed bones.

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“What the hell is he doing?!” Sona gaped as she witnessed Issei break nearly every rule there was when it came to treating burn victims and exposed himself to quite literally a potential lethal full body infection that could permanently cripple if not kill even a high ranking Devil. “Is he trying to kill himself?!”

“Ah. I forgot about how shameless he is when treating himself.” Sirzechs had the decency to grimace as he took in Issei’s quite literally near undead and butchered appearance. They probably should have cut the feed the moment the teen had pulled himself from the center of the crater.

“Sirzechs? Is there a reason why you haven’t teleported him to the medical facilities yet despite his clearly critical condition?” Rias asked with a tense tone, unable to look away from Issei’s nauseating condition.

“Several. First is that believe it or not, Issei has not crossed the critical threshold to trigger the rating game magics to move him automatically as is. So long as a participant’s vital signs are strong and the target has not been rendered unconscious, they will remain as long as they please.” The Maou admitted. “The next is that I do not desire for any potential harm to come to our medical volunteers. You know as well as I do how he reacts to being physically addressed without prior warning.”

“Look! He’s doing something!” Gasper pointed at the screen, prompting everyone to watch as the Sekiryuutei’s body began to glow a curious mix of white and green magics, while simultaneously materializing some curious pills in his left hand and slowly consuming it.

Or at least trying to consume it if his attempts to dry swallow were any indication, before next pulling out an opened bottle of water from literally nowhere and drinking slowly to rectify the issue.

The third reason why Sirzechs didn’t send Issei to the medics, was that there probably were less than a handful of people on the planet that were better at treating severe burns than Issei himself. Even if he was the patient.

The audience watched in morbid fascination as Issei’s flesh began to rejuvenate itself in front of their eyes. Siris fluids and blood from his wounds slowed to a stop. Tears and breaks in his flesh and muscle fibers mended themselves. A few exposed minor organs slowly shifted back into place. Bones fused and were hidden. Skin regrew over his entire body. His flaring nose regained the two thirds of itself that had melted off. His lips were no longer split in three different places. Hair sprouted over his head. His eyes opened.

The Sekiryuutei stood straight up, well defined muscles on a slim body that exemplified every crevice and curve of his frame, and slowly breathed in deeply, rolling his shoulders and flexing his muscles slightly.

In his shameless full naked glory for everyone watching their screens to witness.

And then he breathed out.

“... OOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW.”

The ORC, Sona, and Sirzech all didn’t know why they had expected anything else from him by this point.

o. o. o.

Much like with virtually everything Issei got involved with, the ending of the Rating Game was as unorthodox as the game itself.

Primarily because Issei wouldn’t *leave* the literally collapsing artificial dimension.

Rather, he had gone a step further than simply “not leaving”. Once he had managed to find some solid ground outside of the crater, he had pulled out, piece by piece, a cheap Ikea table, assembled it, then a collapsable lawn chair, and then a widescreen laptop to put on aforementioned table.

Only THEN did he remember that he was still completely buckass naked and remembered to put on some spare clothes he also had stored in his Sacred Gear.

**“Participant Sekiryuutei.”** Grayfia’s voice echoed through the realm while the teen booted up the computer. **“Please cooperate and exit the combat arena. The damage to the artificial dimension is extensive.”**

“You said it yourself Gray-chan. Outside of the original emergency and medical teleporting systems, the explosion messed with the pre-established exit warps. I’m not moving until I know I’m on a secure line.” Issei firmly held his ground. Now that he was FINALLY away from the damn crowds and bird person, he could have a few moments to recollect himself again. Warp Gates were prone to being hacked at times if unattended and had been exploited on multiple occasions in history to devastating effect.

**“You are at risk of falling into the gap between realities.”**

“You make it sound like that hasn’t happened to me before.”

**“It will be the first time without access to your other Sacred Gear.”** Her dry tone pointed out factually. Nor would Ophis be conveniently on hand at the time, but it was best not to bring that up with

“I’ll take my chances.”

**“You’ll *literally* be lost in an infinite undefinable expanse.”**

“I saw that flick three years ago. It was meh at best and the scriptwriter was a hack. Too many fake watersports for my tastes. The lead actress should have been treated better.”

Grayfia looked at Sirzechs with what would be her usual impassive expression save for the slightest of frowns marring her eyebrows. A sign that the situation at hand was getting to her. It wasn’t that she was losing patience, rather that she simply was running out of options to try and deal with the matter.

Her loving husband merely chuckled in mild amusement, clearly having expected something like this to happen in the first place. “Leave him for a moment. The Dimension can last at least a little while longer, and setting up a private secure gate ourselves as a last resort is a quick enough procedure.”

“Are you sure spoiling him like that is wise?” Sona asked warily.

“Issei’s paranoia, while frustrating, is somewhat warranted.” The Maou relented. “The fact that he feels more comfortable and secure in a collapsing dimension of all things than in our facilities is to be expected in hindsight. It wouldn’t be the first time someone’s interfered and interrupted a Gate Transfer…”

“Er, the more I hear about it, the more I’m starting to worry about just how Sempai was able to get anything done when he was younger if all these things kept happening to him.” Gasper cringed.

“You are not the first to question that.” Sirzechs shrugged. “I suppose that just means you’ve yet to witness him in the middle of one of his “work binges”. It’s actually impressive to see him when he truly dedicates himself to a task, in a terrifying and haunting way.”

“It got worse when he met Ajuka-sama and they exchanged notes.” Both wife and husband shivered at that memory and the following fallout.

In the background, they almost heard someone shout “SCIENCE!” with utmost glee and authority.

Nobody noticed Issei’s right hand twitch erratically for a moment right afterwards.

“So how are you going to get him out of there?” Rias asked calmly, never taking her eyes off of the screen. “Knowing him, he really would stay inside long enough to fall into the dimensional gap.”

“Yep.” “Mmm.” “I can see that happening.” “He’s an idiot.” The rest of her Peerage agreed with her without hesitation.

Sirzechs couldn’t help but smile and chuckle. “I see you’ve gotten pretty close to him.”

“Define “close”.” Koneko deadpanned.

That only made the Maou’s grin widen more, before turning to his wife. “As the overseer of the Rating Game, you already have the setup to enter and leave the dimension yourself. If we can’t set up a secure way remotely, it’ll have to be done manually.”

The maid blinked in comprehension before nodding in agreement. “That would probably be for the best.”

A moment later, she was tapped into the announcement system once more. **“Participant Sekiryuutei. Would my personal escorting you out of the vicinity assuage your concerns?”**

Issei paused from watching his porn to digest the offer. “... So long as you don’t drop me somewhere ridiculous, that works.”

**“Very well. I shall be there in a moment.”** Grayfia disappeared in a crimson and silver magic circle while Issei stood up and began to put his things away on screen.

“Well then, now that our friend’s condition is addressed, I suppose you have some thoughts on the Rating Game you wish to voice?” Sirzechs asked the young devils in the room.

“He’s a blink spammer.” Surprisingly, Gasper was the first to speak.

“A what?” Sona frowned.

“I believe he’s referring to Issei’s habit of rapid-fire high-speed displacement.” Sirzechs suggested. “If I recall correctly, some circles refer to short range teleportation as “blinking”, although what Issei does is slightly different than that.”

“His feet.” Kiba frowned. “He always shuffled or took a small step right as he moved. He’s magnifying the distance he travels. It’s… less teleporting and more *redefining* how far he goes with that small movement. It’s more or less instantaneous. I couldn’t follow his speed or predict how far he’d go at all once his ability goes off in the slightest.”

“Ara. I recall when we trained at the school and he isolated himself inside the track field.” Akeno mused. “Rias mentioned he had markers and dancing points all over the ground. We thought it was some curious agility training before, but now…”

“Precision training.” Sona blinked in surprise. “He was complaining about how his body grew and how he was out of practice. He was memorizing how far he’d go with his magnifications and footsteps.”

“Indeed. And like everything else notable in his life, he gave it a name too. He called this specialized combination of footwork and his sacred gear “Little Steps”. A rather underwhelming but appropriate title all things considered.” Sirzechs was pleased with their assessment. “When he was younger, he had made it a point to use Little Steps to accurately travel any pinpoint distance within a kilometer at will on sight. I suppose he still has some time before he regains that level of proficiency.”

“Anywhere in a kilometer instantly?” Gasper balked. “Wait, how far can he go in a single step?”

“Don’t know. How far do you think a well trained Devil can walk if food, water, and time are not an issue?”

“Near limitless range with each step. And able to change direction with just as little drain on stamina and consequence on a dime…” Kiba shivered. “In an open battlefield, someone with a skill like that is almost unstoppable. Speed’s almost a complete non-factor against him so long as nothing’s put in his way. Even then he’d be able to get around most obstacles almost instantly. Flickering in and out of attack ranges would be literally effortless.”

“Stop giving me more reasons to hate him. I like being sane.” Koneko accused irritably.

“No wonder he was never bothered by our powers and was so good at helping us with training.” Gasper looked at Issei as he casually took apart the Ikea table and stored away the parts. Issei’s mind really worked differently than everyone else’s. Where most people thought that the Boosted Gear was a tool meant for raw power and speed, Issei used it to literally redefine the world and overwhelm his enemies with their own power.

“Ara, if anything, it makes the leaders of the Factions even more impressive.” Akeno glanced at Sirzechs, and the burn marks that traveled from the left side of his face down his neck and to his shoulder. “After all they were the ones to stop him.”

Sirzech’s smile remained, but those with sharp eyes noted how plastic it was at the comment. “I assure you, it was not easy. His Balance Breaker has sobering synergy with his Sub-Species’ abilities. And his other Sacred Gear, Blind Eternity… is difficult to manage.”

“Blind Eternity.” Rias echoed the name as she inspected Issei’s wrapped arm, pretending to not notice her brother’s momentary stall. “I suppose we will learn more about it at an even later date?”

“I’m afraid so. Ghost, the individual inside Issei’s other Gear, is an extensive topic to cover. Completely outside of the matters regarding Issei at that.” The Maou chose his words carefully.

“Is he dangerous?” Sona asked with some concern.

“Extremely, but under normal circumstances you could equate him to a harmless clown. Most took Issei more seriously than him a great deal of the time.” The Maou’s smile fell and his mind was filled with distracting thoughts. “... To put it another way, you could say that more than his mother, the faction leaders, Jasmine, the dragons, and even Ddraig, the person that was by far above and beyond infuriated by what happened to Issei as a child was Ghost himself.”

“It’s like in games and stories. It’s the court jester nobody takes seriously that’s the most scary.” Gasper shivered unconsciously.

“Indeed. Moreso since he was the one that tried to warn everyone of what was to come before anyone else.” Sirzechs shook his head. “Another matter I will have to elaborate on later…”

“What of harems?”

The room went quiet at Rias’ question.

“Harems?” Sona echoed warily.

“You saw how he reacted earlier. We were warned about never mentioning it around him. Why? At the very least, can you elaborate on why they matter so much to Issei to the point of literal madness, brother?” Rias finally turned from the screen to look at the Maou directly.

The leader of the Devil world only hesitated for a moment before slowly nodding. “I suppose I can oblige you with that much for now. A few details will be omitted, but it will still suffice to get a better understanding of our friend works. Back then and now.”

He was glad to see he had all their attention.

“I’m sure you’ve at least heard of the first part in his story to some extent. Issei Hyoudou was a normal human child up until around the age of five. During which several important events took place. One was his encounter with an unidentified and peculiar man that, for lack of a better term, awakened his libido and infatuation with breasts.”

“Ara. Asami-san is still rather adamant about personally accosting that individual some day.” Akeno smiled all too eagerly.

“We are all well aware of that.” Sirzechs laughed. “That said, part of his kindled infatuation with women was the desire for a harem. While a bit young, it was an otherwise normal thing to expect from a young boy. What wasn’t expected was Issei’s dedication towards obtaining one. The being in his second Sacred Gear, Ghost, pointed out the barest of requirements needed to have one, and the boy surprisingly took it as a personal challenge. So much so that he did not hesitate at all to take extreme measures to reach and exceed them.”

They didn’t like the sound of that.

“How far he’d go?” Rias inquired, concerned.

“Ghost imposed onto Issei the logistics and realities of what having a successful harem would entail. More to see how he would react than anything.” Sirzechs sighed. “Simply ogling women and being good at intercourse wasn’t enough, obviously. You would need time. Money. Resources. Protection. Contact. Support. Social skills. The ability to read, understand, and manage others to ensure that all those involved were satisfied. As upper class Devils, such resources and education are readily available to us from the beginning, but for a generic human from a mundane background it’s a nigh impossible plateau to reach…”

The Maou shook his head. “The first thing Issei did without even blinking, at the age of five mind you, was boost the rate he learned and studied. Constantly and relentlessly. General education. Advanced education. Biology. Economics. Financial management. Property management. And Porn. From what I’ve been told, he went at it all like a man in the desert went after a feast and water. He would binge study and work on projects for weeks without rest at a time. Whatever caught his attention or made him believe he was insufficient in order to keep “The Harem” as happy and content as possible, he went after it viciously as though it was his mortal enemy. It was a ferocious self imposed commitment that, while oddly placed, could not be compared to anything other than a Dragon on the hunt.”

“He always did feel like he had no motivation.” Kiba noted absently. “He’d get angry all the time for the sake of it, but it was like he had nothing to really look forward to in life.”

The others in the room shared looks, but all quietly agreed was on the nose regarding the Issei of today compared to the one being described.

“As far as Issei was concerned, it was never enough. We strongly suspect his Sacred Gear mutated into a subspecies half a year into his self imposed binge education out of that desperate hunger he felt.”

“Wait, he boosted his *brain*? As a *child*?” Sona balked at the idea. “Ignoring how outright dangerous and irresponsible that is, I thought the results of boosting were temporary?”

“No. He boosted the rate he learned.” Gasper shook his head, looking at Kiba. “It’s like an exp boost in a video game, increasing the rate you level up and your stats grow. It’s not boosting your stats directly. He did the same thing with us during our training.”

Kiba materialized a small dagger in his hands. “... After some effort, I can make weapons with passive abilities that alter the user’s physical performance by a little bit. Faster. Stronger. Quicker stamina recovery… faster learning...”

Sona balked as though she had been hit. She liked to believe she didn’t momentarily glare at Rias in jealousy. She also liked to believe that Rias didn’t flash her a quick smirk in superiority either.

“Hmm. That single minded dedication does sound like Issei.” Akeno pondered curiously. “However I can’t say that it would do wonders for his social skills.”

“And therein lies one of the founding flaws and issues with Issei.” Sirzechs nodded. “Shortly before his obsession with women was kindled, his only friend had moved away from the country. His parents suspected that his obsession with harems was just an attempt to find more friends, but by the time anyone connected the dots, he was so invested into his goals and ahead of anyone his age that he did not have anybody to relate to anymore.”

He looked at his audience firmly. “You must understand, back then, “For the Harem” was practically his catchphrase. Practically his warcry. At first everyone just thought he was going through a phase and using it as an excuse to be strong and wealthy, but we soon realized it was the opposite. Nearly everything he did either to himself or for others really *was* “For the Harem”, and he absolutely refused to accept any other explanation. Even if he was not proficient or even liked the subjects in particular.”

He twisted and played with his mind and body “For the Harem”.

He went to college at the age of nine “For the Harem”.

He relentlessly studied white magic and medicine despite having next to zero talent for either “For the Harem”.

He earned a notable fortune and was building a small business empire from literally nothing “For the Harem”.

He studied how to fight and became strong “For the Harem”.

“It was a single minded madness that kept him going, and by the time anyone realized just how severe it was, it was too late to address it. The best everyone associated with him could do was steer him in a way that prevented him from doing anything too radical and dangerous lest he literally destroy himself in the process.”

“Oh my.” Akeno looked just as unnerved as the others there. They knew Issei was talented, especially when he kept his mouth shut, but they didn’t think that he was the sort that pushed himself to such extremes.

“He went to *college*?” Sona asked disbelievingly.

“He almost set the record for youngest person to obtain a PHD in the campus. His age prevented him from actively practicing legally even had he graduated, so most of his time was in research and development.” Sirzech’s pretended not to notice the girl twitch.

“No wonder everyone that knew him kept on reacting the same way when they learned he was going to Kuoh.” Gasper blinked in sudden understanding.

“... He’s not meant to be alone.”

Everyone turned to look at Rias.

“That’s what Jasmine and Vali said when they visited.” She explained slowly. “He’s… lonely. Desperately. Enough that he’d do all of that nonsense just to try and be attractive and reliable enough in countless fields for others to want to be and stay near him. Enough that it’s constantly driving him insane even without his trauma.”

“That's rather sad.” Akeno frowned. “And yet for the life of me I can’t deny it being the likely truth if you consider how Issei’s twisted logic usually operates.”

“Except he’s an asshole.” Koneko pointed out flatly. “Kinda hard to keep anyone around like that.”

“N-no.” Gasper shook his head. “Remember what Asami-san said happened to him? I don’t think he trusts anyone because of that. He’s doing it on purpose… maybe.”

Personally, Sirzechs heavily leaned on the “maybe” camp. Issei probably didn’t know the answer to that question himself.

“That’s a big maybe.” Kiba noted, but didn’t press the topic further than that.

“It had to be someone he trusted.” Rias cut in, getting more looks. “It wouldn’t have affected him so badly if it was some random person that was responsible for all this.”

“That’s part of the reason.” Sirzechs corrected. “The investigation and the trial essentially picked and tore apart everything he had put together so far piece by piece. Including the few people that he had grown close to. Meticulously. Not just their assets but reputations as well. The entire point of “The Harem” as far as Issei was concerned was to surround himself with people that he could trust and make them happy. People that would stay with him because they cared about him and thought he was reliable to stay safe around in turn. When just about everyone that he thought he could depend on turned away, sometimes even vanished without a trace, one after another, all because a problem that’s focused on him in particular…”

“He fell apart. Probably blames himself for everything as well. And likely pushes others away to avoid a repeat performance.” Kiba grimaced, finally getting the whole picture. “I’m guessing that his father left as well in the mess.”

“The investigation and trial was intense. Too intense for civilians like Ichirou and Asami to endure. Another oversight on our part since we were too busy dealing with our own issues and focusing on Issei in the meantime.” Sirzechs avoided eye contact. “He disappeared shortly after he lost his job in the chaos. He was a talented administrator for a fairly large industrial company that was also put under pressure during the investigation. Issei blames himself for that as well.”

“You couldn’t find him?” Rias frowned, genuinely surprised that a generic human could avoid the resources of the underworld for so long.

“We believe other hands were at play at the time. Issei is a highly valued commodity even now. One that many would want leverage over.” Sirzechs sighed. “Or he may have vanished by less pleasant means. Unfortunately, there was so much going on at the time that few resources could be spared to search for him.”

“As fascinating as this story is, it doesn’t explain a key part in all this.” Sona frowned, looking at the Maou in the eyes. “If Issei had so much support from you and my sister, then why did he undergo such trauma in the first place? The only reason I can possibly think of is if another party strong armed you. One with significant-”

“I recommend you stop your inquiry there, Sona. At least here” Sirzechs cut off her analysis with a slightly stern undertone. A warning for her sake if anything else.

“... So it *is* them.”

“Sona?” Rias looked at her friend in confusion. Her mind was still having trouble getting around the spell that shrouded the details around Issei. “How…?”

“Lord Lucifer’s right. It would be better to talk about it later, when we’re away from potential related parties.” Sona frowned and crossed her arms. She still had trouble connecting the dots if she was focusing primarily on what Issei could be roped into, or even the Sekiryuutei… but if she focused *only* on the parties that were big enough to give her sister, and the rest of the Maou collectively a hard time, there were only a handful of possible culprits it could be. Less if she took into account which ones had made unusual movements and strides in the past five years.

It was best to keep Rias in the dark, if only for the rest of the night while they were in the vicinity of a sizeable portion of Devil aristocracy. The pot was stirred up enough as it was.

They all paused and watched ast Grayfia appeared on the screen next to Issei, who had just finished storing away his random trinkets, and soon vanished again in her magic circle.

“What now then?” Rias asked. She was not ignorant of the current delicate situation. Issei’s existence already made their position unstable as is. His victory turned it outright volatile. She couldn’t just leave and assume everything would fall into place peacefully.

“We will regather in the main hall and make an announcement of Issei’s victory, annul your engagement, give Riser’s performance some admittedly well deserved flattery, assure everyone of his health, and maintain the party as long as possible to sooth everyone’s concerns.” His lips twitched in amusement. “And inform them all that Issei has decided not to grace them with his presence after such a trying ordeal.”

“It was clearly a hard fight for the idiot.” Koneko also had some small trouble keeping her face straight. Even accidentally getting literally charcoaled didn’t bug the Sekiryuutei in the slightest.

“That can’t be it.” Sona frowned. “What of that vial he was flaunting earlier that scared Riser? You recognized it. Some of the audience did too. What is it?”

“Valuable.” Sirzechs flatly replied clearly not intending to go into detail. “No, it would be more accurate to say it's invaluable for devils across the board. It’s something that a good many would without question kill to get their hands on, and just as many would do worse to ensure that the story behind it never reaches the public.”

“And Riser looked to be near the top of the list. He wasn’t willing to fight until he saw it and Issei began to run his mouth.” Rias connected some more dots. “... What will happen to him?”

“That all depends on his cooperation.” The Maou’s face and tone was unreadable. “His parents are not unaware of many sensitive details as well. While they are more amicable than their son, they have been rather recluse as of late. Hopefully this turn of events will prompt them to be open to discussion once again.”

Meaning that whatever Riser had been doing was without his parent’s support, but they weren’t going out of their way to stop it either. Or rather, they were being pushed into a position to not interfere.

Come to think of it, other than officially supporting Riser’s push for the engagement, the Lord and Lady of the Phenex family had been unusually reclusive in general as of late…

“He’ll be put under guard then. To keep him from running, and to keep him safe.” Sona’s gaze darkened. It wasn’t the first time something like this had happened, but it didn’t make it any better. “As cathartic as it was seeing Riser get his uppancommance, I’ll be glad when this night is over.”

“So long as Issei leaves without any further fanfaire, we can consider tonight a success.” Sirzechs nodded. “Yuballuna will supervise him in a secure location until he can be escorted out of the facilities and back home.”

“Can I see him?” Rias asked hopefully.

“Not yet. You need to talk to the guests to maintain some control over public perception and rumors. The more you two are seen separate from one another, at least for this event, the more everyone will assume this was simply some orchestrated plot of mine with you stuck in the middle.”

“Hoh? So that’s why he has barely paid attention to Rias since he showed up.” Akeno hummed curiously, somewhat impressed. “I’m surprised he was able to pull it off so well in hindsight. From an outside perspective, this whole thing could simply be chalked up as an opportunity for revenge with some minor extra undertones. If anything, Rias will barely count as a footnote when this is all over…”

“No.”

“Ara?”

“Issei’s not like that.” Rias’ eyes blazed with fury. “You all should know better by now. He’s crude and vulgar, but he’s one of the most selfless people I’ve ever laid eyes on even if he would curse out anyone that would try to call him out. He wouldn’t go out of the way to expose himself for something selfish like revenge. Not like this. He did this because of me. Or am I wrong, brother?”

Sirzechs sighed at the accusation his sister slung at him. They grew up so quickly. “... You aren’t wrong, but you are not correct either, dear sister. You likely know better than most how vexingly irregular our friend is. What I can say for certain was that your relationship with him *was* a determining factor.”

Much to most of their surprise, Rias let out a bitter laugh and shook her head. “A determining factor… I forget how cold you can be at times. And how do you plan on making all this up to Issei? He’s the Sekiryuutei. He can’t hide now. Not like before. The extra attention he’ll receive will drive him more insane than he already is by year’s end.”

Much to everyone’s surprise, she then turned to leave the room.

“Where are you going?!” Sona was not the only one reaching after her.

“I’m going to Issei. If no one else will at least thank him for what he’s done, I will.”

“Rias.” Sirzechs spoke up calmly just as she reached the door with a tone that she could not identify. “Grayfia will be with him the entire time. She’s a familiar face. He won’t be alone. If you aren’t seen as separate from him here, you know how bad it can be in the long term.”

Judging from the way her hands balled into fists and her teeth were clenched, his advise was not what she wanted to hear. “... Make it fast. Even if this was part of some ridiculous plot, leaving him like this after what he’s done for me is simply ungrateful and cruel. The longer he dwells alone like this, the longer his mind will come to conclusions about us that will only make his condition worse.”

Her brother couldn’t help but laugh bitterly. “My dear sister, you know I can’t promise that. Riser may have been known to be a talented socialite and host many audacious parties that dragged on through the night. However, you know as well as I do how prolonged and exhausting venues like this tend to get.”

Rias opened her mouth almost immediately to make a counter argument.

“And no, we can’t use Issei as a convenient excuse to kick them out early either.” Unfortunately he knew exactly what she was going to ask. They still needed to at least look like we’re still in control of the situation.

“Then what good is he for anymore?” Koneko asked in almost mock confusion before getting a half hearted whack upside the back of the head from Akeno.

“Making us look like *we’re* in control.” Sirzechs answered, turning to the door and his sister. “Come. I’m certain that a good number of guests will be depending on us for some answers.”

Rias wanted to lash out at her brother, but stilled her tongue. He was right. The sooner they got this over with, the better.

If only.

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Grayfia sighed as she watched Issei sleep deeply in the guest bed.

The teen was not exhausted from the fight, but merely drained on principle. He had always been like that. The “Sleeping” part of his nature ironically was what drove him to run at full throttle at all times as a child, all but forcing him into a state where “sleep” was the greatest option for his body to take. Not out of sloth, but of necessity.

Now though, he was constantly drained for a completely different reason.

Hopefully the dreamless spells she had been brushing up on provided some results for once.

“How is the progress on decommissioning the battle grounds?” She asked the facility members tasked with the project through a magic circle.

“Slow going. This ground was specifically commissioned for private events on this estate. A good and bad thing. It’s higher quality than most unofficial artificial dimensions, but it still didn’t get the funding to make it on par with the robust ones used for high grade rating games. Whatever the Sekiyruutei did for a last move, it did a number on this place. We have to pick it apart carefully or it might collapse on itself and cause dimensional instability on the entire property and then some. Gonna be a couple of hours before we get everything stable enough for the property’s other services to kick in again.” The manager reported on the other side.

“You and your team will be compensated for your work. Notify me on any further developments.”

“You’re the boss. Just don’t let that monster loose again without warning me next time, allright? I’m going to get an earful for the next month from friends and nobles alike asking about this mess.”

“If you desire to be placed on any potential projects, I recommend you speak of our guest with proper care.” Her tone developed a small weight to it. Even if Issei was dead to the world and didn’t hear it, she didn’t want to make the names any more a common thing than it already was.

“Fine. Fine. You’re the one that pays the checks. Whatever you say boss.” The devil on the other side waved off her warning. “Just remember, we’re dimensional engineers. Not servants. Lip service isn’t our thing.”

“Noted.” Grayfia had half a mind to search for a replacement, but thought better of it. Devi was one of the best in the business despite his behavior. If he said he would be available for an on call job, then it meant he was packed and had men prepared before the communication spell was being cast.

Unfortunately, it also meant that while he worked, the teleportation gates in and out of the facilities were offline to prevent any potential timespace disasters from taking place. Part of the risk of relying too much on time-space magic for frivolous affairs in an isolated property.

Normally these sorts of issues were a non factor in official venues, but they were not at an official venue. And normally the combatants were not capable of causing that level of wide scale damage.

She had no one to blame but herself for the oversight. She should have expected something like this might happen.

Regardless, it shouldn’t be much of an issue in the end. Even if the repairs take some time, it would still be completed well within the expected duration of the party, so onlookers shouldn’t suspect anything amiss.

She’d have to inform Sirzechs of the development just in case though.

Hopefully Issei would remain asleep and relaxed for the duration.

o. o. o.

Rias was exhausted and reaching the ends of her patience as she smiled and chatted with another member of the upper class who wanted to do nothing than “offer their condolences” for her ordeals and be worried about her close proximity with the Sekiryuutei.

She wasn’t fooled. They all wanted gossip material so they could plan ahead with their own schemes. Issei’s very existence shook up the status quo of the underworld even when everyone thought he was dead. It would only get worse when word of him being alive would spread.

She refrained from badmouthing him. Or saying anything good for that matter. The less she said about him personally, the less interested the other parties would be and the quicker they’d leave to talk to someone else. She could see her Peerage in a similar position in other parts of the dining hall, and were dealing with it in their own way…

… That said she had mixed feelings on just why Koneko and Gasper were attracting such large numbers that she could barely see them.

Ah. Fortunately Akeno had noticed the anomaly as well and was backing them up. That was good. Gasper looked like he was barely holding on. He had been getting better, but the young vampire still didn’t do well when put on the spot like that. Last thing they needed was for Gasper to accidentally freak out and freeze time and cause an incident.

“Looks like you’re ready to call it a day. Not that I can blame you. That dress is clearly not your first choice.”

“It was Riser’s…” Rias paused as she realized she recognized the voice and turned to see someone she didn’t expect. “Carnelian?!”

“Hey.” The albino Bael waved cheerfully, decked in a tasteful red and white dress, chiq glasses, and her medium length pearl white hair brushed back with two thick strands sticking refusing to adhere with the rest, making them look almost like rabbit ears falling back as though they were too heavy to stay up. “What’s up cousin?”

“I haven’t seen you in almost a year!” Rais didn’t think twice to hug her cousin affectionately. Carnelian Bael was someone that she looked up to as a woman. Strong. Independent. Successful in her business ventures. Kind. Beautiful. A philanthropist. She was everything that a young girl would idolize in a role model. “You’re always so busy and we never get to talk!”

“What can I say? It’s been a busy year. I barely got here before the rating game started.” The elder of the two broke the hug first and held them at arms length apart. “Seriously though? That dress. What was that idiot Riser thinking?”

“With his dick, probably.”

“Ugh. Wouldn’t be the first time. That bird brained fool. I keep telling him that that embarrassing act of his only works on girls and not actual women, but he never listens. How he manages to keep Bella around I’ll never know.” Carnelian shook her head embarrassed.

“You… don’t seem all that worried about him.” Rias seemed slightly perturbed by her cousin’s demeanor. “He and his peerage just got destroyed by I-the Sekiryuutei.”

“Don’t tell me you are? After all that nonsense you’ve been put through?” The elder scoffed before sipping some champagne, seemingly ignoring Rias’ slipup. “Don’t worry. It was obvious that their opponent was holding back. If it was anyone else, I might have been concerned about Riser’s continued breathing, but you know what they say about the durability of idiots. That empowered state of his at the end was admittedly impressive, far beyond what anyone expected of him, but it was still pointless in the end against an opponent that fights by literally overcharging his enemies to self-destruct in an instant with minimal effort. It was that form’s ability to be and bleed off energy that probably saved him from that last move. Five hundred boosts at once… I doubt anyone short of someone around the level of a Maou could handle that level of overload on the spot under conventional circumstances.”

“I, yes, I guess you’re right about that. You do have a history with Riser so you’d know better than me.” Rias shifted uncomfortably. She didn’t know why, but she felt that something was off. “I’m surprised you’re not as put on guard about the Sekiryuutei. Being that you’re…”

“A Bael? Still picking up ashes and debris from his earlier rampage?” Carnelian’s smile was amused, but unreadable. An entertained act. “Don’t tell anyone, but it’s water under the bridge as far as I’m concerned. Not exactly something shared by most under my care, but that’s understandable. At the very least, it put Zekram and *Father* in their places for a bit.”

Rias had to hold back a small cringe at how Carnelian referred to the lord and ancestor of her house. It was well known that despite being made the heir apparent while being only half Devil, Carnelian was not particularly fond of them and acted against their wishes on occasion. That said, the press was often on her side due to her philanthropic actions with the Ars Nova organization, helping and supporting low class and reincarnated Devils get their bearings in the world and occasionally even supporting them against the upper class. It was one of the largest non-profit charity organizations in Devil territory and the general populace *loved* Carnelian for it, to put it mildly.

Between that and her irregularly white colored Power of Destruction, she was known world wide as the infamous “Ivory Star Princess” in contrast to Rias’ moniker of “Crimson Ruin Princess”.

Rias doubted that the current Lord Bael and the Great King Zekram Bael even could get rid of Carnelian even if they wanted to. Not without causing one hell of a public backlash that would absolutely destroy their support for at least a century if not two.

That said, she couldn’t help but be flabbergasted by her cousin’s words. Family matters or not, the damage Issei had done to the Bael territory had scarred more than just land. People, business, relics, and even a portion of the until then untouched Bael castle had been rent asunder in the disaster. It was hard to imagine any member of nobility taking such devastation to their territory, their responsibility so easily.

There was a needling feeling in the back of her mind. She was forgetting something important. Something that was extremely relevant to the conversation that her subconscious was screaming at the top of its lungs.

“I-I’m not sure how you can manage that. Or why for that matter. I doubt I’d be able to forgive something like that happening on my territory if that ever happened.” The redhead’s smile grew unsettled. Something wasn’t right.

“Most wouldn’t. But I was brought into the game late.” Carn smiled and crossed her arms. “I don’t have that intimate connection to the territory and power and people like you do. I’m more… practical, I suppose. I have a human’s mindset with these things. It does make things a bit harder at times on occasion. Actually caring about standards and investing heavily in the workforce doesn’t exactly endear me with some of the older generations, even when it does produce results. Favors and information can only get a girl so far in the world these days to get anything done. Sometimes all anyone needs is just a big stick to bash everyone over the head with to make them fuck off. Or dragon, in your case.”

“Carnelian, should you be talking like this here? We’re in the middle of…” Rias trailed off and blinked in surprise as she found themselves outside on the veranda adjacent to the main hall.

“Don’t worry. I happen to know a thing or two about getting away for some privacy and sensitive conversations.” The albino smiled mischievously. “Even if it’s no secret that you and your brother tried nearly everything to get out of your engagement before throwing a thought dead Sekiryuutei at it. I saw that rating game of yours. Very impressive. I haven’t seen Riser pushed that hard in years, and that was before he showed off his new bag of tricks.”

Again, a stray thought in Rias’ mind told her that something was extremely amiss. “I-it wasn’t me that beat Riser though. It was the Sekiryuutei-”

Carnelian scoffed and shook her head in mock frustration. “Oh come now. It’s just us here. No need to be so formal and put on a show for me, cousin. Someone like that boy would outright ignore or mock anyone that addressed him like that, and you clearly know him enough to show up on his own.”

“... He’s not like that.” Rias faltered, giving into her cousin’s prompting. “Issei does what he wants, and hates events like this beyond reason. I’m more surprised than everyone else that he appeared, and as far as they knew until today, he was *dead*.”

“That selfish huh? Not surprising for a dragon.” There was certain teasing tone in her voice that couldn’t be ignored.

“No it’s not that. Issei’s…” Rias trailed off to recompose herself. “He’s difficult. And he knows it. But instead of trying to better himself, he just avoids everyone instead.”

“Sounds complicated. And like he’s made his mind up. If anything though, it makes the fact that he showed up at all even more curious like you said. Are you certain he didn’t come to help you? Don’t be shy. I can tell there’s something else going on.”

“It’s nothing… I think. I don’t know.” She shook her head. The needling in her brain was quickly spawning into a genuine headache. “He clearly knows Riser and…”

And there it was.

Issei knew Riser.

And so did Carnelian.

In fact, it was common knowledge that Carnelian knew Riser since her debut into Devil Society.

Right around the time Issei went mad.

Something in her mind clicked. It clicked so hard that it hurt and she blacked out for a moment.

“Rias! Get away from her!” Before she could even begin to realize her situation, a wave of magic from inside the building distracted her, and Carnelian jumped back to avoid getting slashed apart with a whip of water.

“Ah! Sona! How are you? It’s been far too long. You look good and healthy.” Carnelian greeted the aggressive newcomer with as much geniality as she did with Rias.

“Sona, what…?” Rias was confused in more than one way as her best friend and rival ran to her side shortly.

“It was her.” The Sitri growled dangerously. “I don’t know how. Or why. But she’s the one responsible for Hyoudou being Hyoudou.”

“Now that’s just untrue.” Carnelian genuinely took offense to that. She’d claim his more recent developments, but Issei was a spectacularly unique individual long before she met him.

“What are you doing here, Carnelian Bael?” Sona didn’t fall for the innocent act. “Not just Sirzechs, but the Maou in general would put in every effort to make certain you would not be among the invited. You’re risking a lot showing here.”

“Is it so wrong to want to see some old faces?” The Ivory Star Princess sighed, not at all worried about her current position. “I haven’t seen either of you in over a year. Riser’s been avoiding me for months…”

“And Hyoudou? Five years, right?” Sona accused.

“And some months.” Came the shameless reply, all but cementing her guilt. “Judging from your words, you’ve determined some of my history with him on your own, rather than being outright told by your siblings. No doubt they wanted to keep you two out of this rather convoluted mess, not that I blame them. Out of curiosity, can you care to tell me how you figured it out? That vexing spell of the Grigori’s is rather potent, not for a lack of trying either. It has next to little effect on myself, but trying to inform others is a more or less an impossible ordeal. I could literally spell it out to anyone as though they were a child on paper and yet the logic and information seems to just flow out their minds as if there’s nothing to retain it.”

“It wasn’t that hard. All I had to do was focus on everything that happened five years ago and stop thinking about Hyoudou. Almost all the details fell into place rather easily afterwards.”

Much to their surprise, Carnelian reacted as though she had been slapped.

“Stop… thinking about Issei? Ah. Aha.” She smiled in an unsettled way and grabbed her head, her smile widening into something unstable. “Aha! Hahaha! Stop *thinking* about him?! Hahahaha!”

“What on earth is so funny about what I said? It’s practically second nature for anyone with common sense to do that.” Sona was unsettled by the unhinged laughing. It was as though she had pressed a hidden button on the young woman that even she didn’t know about.

“Carnelian?” Rias didn’t know what was going on, but she didn’t like it.

“Sorry! I’m sorry! But what you just said! You have no idea just how ridiculous its very premise is!” She moved her hand to reveal eyes absolutely brimming with madness and obsession. “That boy, no, that Dragon! What he represents! What he does! What he is! He means so much more to the world than you could possibly understand! And I! I! I had the nerve to-! Hahaha!”

“I fail to see what is so amusing about the current situation. Carnelian.”

It was at that moment that a new party joined the conversation. And with it a curtain of power that put stress on the very building around them.

Sirzechs approached the group with his head held up high, and no mercy in his eyes.

“B-brother.” “Lord Lucifer.” Rias and Sona stammered at his arrival.

“Sirzechs, haha. It’s been a while.” Carnelian on the other hand, didn’t so much as react to his display of power, instead hunched over from her laughing and fumbling with her glasses for some reason.

Three seconds later she stood straight up completely composed, though still smiling. It was as though her bout of hysteria had never taken place. “My apologies for the outburst. I am surprised myself at how poorly I reacted. Ah, I haven’t laughed that hard in years.”

“You are as dependent on your Sacred Gear as ever.” Sirzechs outright ignored her apology.

“It has its uses.” She replied effortlessly as though nothing was amiss with her behavior.

“Sacred Gear?” Sona’s and Rias’ eyes both widened at the revelation. They knew that mixed breeds like Carnelian could occasionally get them, but at no point did anyone ever insinuate that the Bael Heir had one of her own.

The conversation went on without their acknowledgement. “I explicitly forbid you from attending tonight’s events, heir Bael. You were not invited, nor welcome. I recommend you leave. Now.”

“And how am I to do that?” She smiled and crossed her arms. “You stated yourself, the teleportation gates are shut down. I also do not possess a familiar capable of transporting me off the premises.”

“Proper accommodations will be made then.”

“No doubt far away from our mutual acquaintance then. You seem quite eager to be active this time around. Then again we all are, understandably.”

The weight of Sirzech’s power increased slightly. “I see that your reckless gall has not changed despite your superior’s efforts.”

This time it was Carnelian to show weakness in a twitch of the mouth. “It was well deserved. I assure you. If anything they only solidified and refined it.”

“Leave him be. Regardless of what you desire or anticipate, Issei’s in no condition to even *know* you are nearby. You’ve done enough damage.”

“Oh I’m more than aware of what’s been done. Five years is more than enough time to learn that much. Five years is enough to do many things.” Carnelian’s smile slowly fell. “An empire can be grown and destroyed. Allies made. Five years is more than long enough to plot and address someone in my position without any consequences. Or even begin to try to help Issei. But just like then, and now, you do *nothing*, Maou. Out of spite. Caution. Fear. Whatever petty excuse you have, the results are always the same.”

Her eyes glanced to the main hall, prompting Rias and Sona to do so as well, though Sirzechs remained unmoved. A good portion of the guests were playing audience to their strained conversation.

“Or are you planning on changing that habit for once? Cousin?”

It was at that moment that Rias saw something in Sirzechs that she never believed she’d ever have the horror of witnessing.

A true desire to kill.

“I’m impressed you have the nerve to make such a blaise statement.” His tone was even. His posture was calm. His power was controlled. But his eyes literally glowed with rage. “Zekram has taught you well.”

Carnelian smiled and turned to walk inside. “Do say that in earshot of my sperm donor. I’m certain you’ll receive a far more pleasing reaction.”

“I will try. I can certainly see the family resemblance.”

That managed to dig under the woman’s skin if her sudden pause in her departure was any indication.

She opened her mouth to retort something likely scathing, but was interrupted as a light and commotion spawned in the main hall.

It took them a total of ten seconds to realize that it was a teleportation gate.

Five seconds after that, Grayfia and Issei appeared completely confused in the center of the room… literally.

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A sudden ten foot fall was nothing to recover from for Grayfia.

Neither for Issei.

Had he been awake.

WHAM!

“GAH?!” Sekiryuutei or not, waking up to being literally dropped on your head wasn’t fun.

“Issei!? Are you all right?!” The maid asked, rushing up to the young man falling flat on his face.

“Gray-chaaaan. I know I haven’t been easy to deal with lately, but that really hurrrt.” The teen moaned like a child while cradling his head and crying crocodile tears, giving him a completely different image than the impassive unstoppable monster he had portrayed just a few hours earlier. “Couldn’t you have woken me up another way? I still have a hangover.”

Clearly this wasn’t the first time he had been woken up this way.

“That wasn’t me.” The Maid frowned, at the ready to be attacked at any moment before realizing they were in the middle of a crowded hall. “Issei, I need you to keep your head down, control your breathing, and stay calm.”

The teen immediately went rigid, knowing almost instantly that he was in deep shit again. But he didn’t pick his head up off the ground.

“I told you.” His tone was shaky and ominous. “I fucking told you.”

Grayfia ignored acknowledging his words and addressed the audience. “Everyone, I know you are confused, but if you would please, I *highly recommend* that you all leave the room quickly, and quietly without commotion.”

Those with common sense could easily hear the unspoken warning and made way to leave the room as swiftly as they could.

Unfortunately, they were in a party primarily consisting of Devil Aristocracy. A population that consisted of a high percentage of individuals that couldn’t tell if their lives were in danger if someone shoved a loaded gun in their mouths.

“Grayfia! What is going on? Why have you brought the Seikiryuutei here?!” One particularly rotund man demanded, stepping forward.

“As I stated before, dear guest, I am not responsible for our sudden appearance. And neither was the Sekiryuutei, who was until just moments ago asleep. I can only suspect that another party thought it in their interests to subvert the facility’s teleportation gates and disrupt everyone’s *peaceful* night with this unassuming trick. Regardless of how reckless it was given how unstable the dimensional space of the facility currently is.” The Maid’s words were stressed, all but ordering the man to go away lest something very bad would take place.

“Someone tried to kill the Sekiryuutei?”

“Idiot could have done a better job.”

“Or at least not dumped him right on top of us.”

A slowly growing chorus of whispers echoed throughout the room, all belonging to idiots that thought that they couldn’t be heard.

Issei’s breathing was progressively growing more frequent and unsettled.

“It should also be noted that our esteemed guest is *not particularly fond of crowded spaces*. One could say *violently* so, if pressured enough.” Grayfia all but spelled it out to the idiots that hadn’t figured it out by now.

Fortunately, it was enough for most to finally give Issei a wide berth, if not flat out leave the room.

But not all.

“Nonsense.” Another, particularly flushed and intoxicated Devil scoffed. “If that was the case, then he wouldn’t have pestered us with his presence earlier!”

“That would indeed have been the case, had he not purposely been notably imbibed on the facility’s drink, Lord Dantalion.” Grayfia this time didn’t bother to be polite as she walked up and gently steered the idiot away from Issei as briskly as she could. “Now if you would please…”

“Sempai.” Gasper moved in the opposite direction of the crowd to help his friend, but was stopped by Koneko grabbing his arm. “What?”

“Don’t. It’ll only cause problems.” She frowned, clearly not liking the situation either. She didn’t see Issei in the best of light, but she was fully aware that he didn’t deserve what was happening at that moment. And she liked the idea that someone was purposefully trying to make matters worse even less. Issei was a pain to be around, but he never actually started problems for anyone.

“Honestly, you’re such a drama queen Issei. You’ve been dropped on your head countless times over the years. Healing from a lump like that should be effortless for you by now.”

If Issei had frozen before, he was absolutely motionless now. It was as though time no longer applied to him.

“No… no. No no no no no no.” Only a handful of individuals with abnormal hearing could catch what he was whispering in an absolutely cold sweat, but the terror in his voice was undeniable.

“Carnelian Bael. You are not on the invitation list to tonight’s events.” Grayfia coldly stated. “Please leave the premises.”

“As I’ve told your lord, desired or not, leaving simply isn’t possible given the current circumstances.” The accused sighed. “Truly, I only came to see Riser and my cousin’s announcement. You make it sound as though I knew Issei was going to be here when you purported him to be dead for nearly five years.”

Grayfia didn’t fall for the bait. “Please leave. If not for the guest’s and facility’s sake, then for litigation. You are violating the restraining order that your family placed against the Sekiryuutei and this is not an organized legal locale that would serve as an exception for its functions. By addressing the other party, you are breaking its precedent.” The maid’s tone was ominously cold, and while she did not let loose a drop of her power, those that knew her were well aware of what she could do at a moment’s notice.

“That may be true, however if you recall, the order and its associated restraints were dismissed shortly after the other party in question was widely believed to be deceased. By your employer’s pen no less. Was it not?” Carnelian smiled knowingly, causing Grayfia to reluctantly admit the latter’s point.

In order to truly sell to the world that Issei really was dead five years ago, Sirzechs and the other Maou had taken many excessive legal steps to underscore that the boy really was dead. Ones that normally would still be in place for some time even after death for normal individuals in the case that they were potentially secretly resurrected by the Peerage system. It was a way to imply that they hadn’t just killed the boy, but absolutely obliterated his body in the process so that there was no possible way that he would ever come back, even if it did open them up to potential legal loopholes and problems down the line.

Like now.

Carnelian pressed the opening she had made for herself. “Anyways, how could I lose the opportunity to what very well be my last chance to speak to the Sekiryuutei that destroyed my domain? I’m sorry but I’ll have to take my chances.”

“Last chance?”

More than one person there picked up on Carnelian’s odd choice of words.

“Carnelian? What do you mean by that?” Rias asked, the first to reach the wide circle of bodies before Sirzechs or Sona could stop her.

“Oh? You mean your brother didn’t inform you, Rias? I thought they would have at least informed you of his circumstances.” The albino smiled sadly, looking back at her cousin.

“Lady Bael! I highly recommend you stop speaking on the matter!” Grayfia didn’t try to hide the warning in her voice this time.

“Why not? I think it’s only right to let everyone know how little time Issei has left.”

The room went dead silent.

Issei did not so much as move.

“You…”

“What?” Rias’ eyes widened in genuine shock, as did virtually everyone else.

“Did you truly think that a child barely thirteen could manifest the power to combat the leaders of the three factions without consequence for well over three hours straight? And cause widespread destruction of an entire major territory?” Carnelian shook her head in pity. “The Juggernaut Drive is well known among those that research Sacred Gears. An elevated Berserk state primarily used by Boosted Gear and Divine Dividing wielders to tap into the power of their contained beasts. Issei is without question a once in a millenia master of the Boosted Gear, but that day… was an exceptionally intense series of events. While that power viciously eats away at the user’s life force on a good day, for a child that barely started puberty to wield it for so long… the impact must have been nothing short of permanently crippling.”

All eyes turned to the young teen lying on the ground that had not moved an inch.

“Truth be told, I wouldn’t be surprised if any other human would have withered away after expending that much life force at such a young age by now. Humans are considered lucky if they can manage to live past a lone century. But, Issei is an exception among exceptions. Between his extensive knowledge and experience in the medical field, his delving into the mysteries of Senjutsu and Ki, and that peculiar ability called Presence, he could no doubt have managed to stretch and ration what little he had left to last as long as he has. That said, even I have doubts as to how much longer he can persist. Five, maybe ten more years at the very most if he’s fortunate. No more than that.”

“He's dying?” Gasper’s eyes widened in genuine shock, and this time Koneko didn’t stop him. She was as stunned as he was. As was the rest of Rias’ Peerage, and the audience for that matter. Out of all the things that could be possibly wrong with Issei, they had never assumed that an extremely limited lifespan was one of them.

A wave of power silenced the room as Sirzechs finally gave up on being polite and pushed himself into the center of the disaster. “That is enough. Everyone please vacate the-”

*An eye opened in the back of the cave.*

Unfortunately, the Maou had stepped in too late.

Issei’s head lifted itself barely, just enough for one of his eyes to pierce through Carnelian’s. “What. Do. You. Want.”

His words were soft and nigh emotionless, and barely audible. And yet, nobody would be surprised if everyone in the building had heard them.

Even if Sirzechs wanted to move now, it would only make everything worse.

The two stared one another down, countless subtle tells and emotions flickered between the pair that only the other could possibly be able to interpret. And yet it all fell short.

“An apology is obviously not on the table, nor would it be accepted at this point.” Carnelian started slowly, and vaguely. It wasn’t surprising for those that knew her. “If you truly want to know, I do have an unlikely offer to start things off.”

The young woman held out a hand and materialized an ornate black box slightly larger than her hand. With a small gesture, she held it out in front of herself and opened it.

A series of gasps echoed in the room.

“She’s joking.”

“Is that what I think it is?”

“After everything he’s done?”

“What on earth is going on?” Sona and Rias were not exempted from the crowd.

After all, it wasn’t everyday that someone laid eyes on a *mutated Queen peerage piece.* Quite literally the strongest and most powerful peerage artifact one could hope to possibly obtain. Anyone that could handle such an absurd item and harness its power could very likely lay claim to being one of the most powerful Queens in the underworld, if not now then eventually.

That said, while the audience was rendered stunned by both the artifact and the offer…

*From the unseen back of the cave, rage erupted, ignited, and speared forth…*

Carnelian barely had enough time to coat her hands in an ivory white magic before a lance of crimson and black fire nearly tore them from her wrists and set the box ablaze.

The fire died before it even hit the ground, carbonizing the container at a record speed… but somehow leaving the Queen Piece unmarred.

“I figured as much,” Carnelian was unsurprised by the sudden display of violence that nearly disfigured her, flexing her hands and fingers to get rid of physical shock they had experienced regardless of her protections. Already there were signs of minor first degree burns becoming visible on her skin.

“I would say it was a sick joke even for you, but I know better.” Slowly, ominously, Issei picked himself up from the floor, his mouth now fanged and notable embers glowing and occasionally escaping his mouth. His body language was unsteady, but dangerous. Like a wounded apex predator ready to strike at anything and everything at a moment’s notice. His normally normal human brown eyes were now glowing green with black sclera, a telltale sign that he was on the cusp of doing something very unpleasant. “Don’t play with me with that half-assed red herring or it won’t be just the box next time.”

*Sitting, yet towering over all there, a crimson beast with flared out scales like sharpened shields leered over the traitor.*

“Calling a Mutated Queen piece half-assed. Only you.” In spite of his rage, the young woman only seemed to be amused as she bent down to pick up the dropped piece. She barely managed to hide the small tremors that wracked her body under the horrifying pressure placed on her. “Truthfully, I wish to clear things up between us, all of us, but I suppose some bridges really are burnt down for good. Even so, I hold hope that we can manage to put aside enough to collaborate on-”

“No.”

“You haven’t even-”

“I can already tell where you’re going with this. I would tell you to fuck off and bother Nee-an, but we both know she’d murder you or anyone associated with you before you’d open your mouths. I’m almost envious of such unfounded confidence.” With a slow gesture from his left hand, the Boosted Gear materialized itself, much to the audience’s alarm.

Issei’s eyes briefly scanned everyone in the room. From Sirzechs to Grayfia. To the idiot nobles watching, only a tenth of which were actually intelligent enough to realize they were in danger…

To the catering staff. Including the man that had walked by him and Grayfia at the very beginning and gave him the idea to get smashed to tolerate the crowds in the first place.

A man with notably violet eyes.

The seemingly unrelated and unremarkable individual at the back of the room gave him the smallest of nods.

And that was the entirety of their interaction.

He returned his attention to the person that ruined his life.

A familiar vial of blue powder appeared in his hand.

“It all goes back to this. Right?”

“It’s blue.” Carnelian’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. She had not been present when it was first shown, and she was hiding from the bulk of the guests, so she didn’t see or know of it until that moment. “So you really did finish it…”

“Five years ago.” The teen stated factually, his eyes never turning away from her. “Five. *Fucking*. ***Years***.”

“Issei-”

“Would anyone like to know what is so special about this?” He turned to the crowd, not letting her have a word in. “Why everyone that recognizes it seem to be making such a magnificently big deal about something that looks like a Breaking Bad prop knockoff?”

“Huh. Now that I look at it, it does kinda look like-” One idiot in the background mused out loud before being silenced by an elbow from his significant other.

“What are you doing?” Grayfia tried to remain calm, but those that knew her could immediately pick up something was amiss given that she had actually bothered to ask that question in the first place.

“Issei, please calm down. Let me-” Sirzechs tried to regain control over the conversation…

*… Until the titanic crimson dragon turned its attention to him, challenging him to continue speaking.*

If asked at a later date, the Maou would admit that he had almost struck out at Issei with a large portion of his power at that moment on pure reflex.

“I trusted you five years ago. I gave you the benefit of the doubt since then. I *humored* you today. And where are we now? No. We do things my way this time, Lucifer.”

There was a cold and tired finality in the young man’s voice. A limit had been reached. A line had been crossed. Violated over and over again. And Sirzechs would not be able to attempt to control how events played out this time.

“Issei, I would not speak more on the matter if I were you.” Carnelian’s smile was gone. “You have little precious time left as it is, and the gag order-”

“Is for the living.” He cut her off with a wild, knowing, and insane smile that simply did not look right on him. “Tied to the restraining order and several other legal conditions you imposed on me from the previous trial no less. Nee-san can’t talk. The Maou can’t talk. Zaz can’t talk. The Ass can’t talk. Heaven can’t talk. Not without invoking that bullshit legal magic you and the *Bael* set up to have everything go your way, or else the “guilty” party’s magic would actively work against them at best and tear them apart from the inside out at worst. But now? *I can.*”

“... Oh dear.” For once Carnelian, Sirzechs, Rias, and Grayfia were all of the same mind if their matching facial expressions were anything to go by.

Issei was going to *talk.* Unrestrained, and in earnest.

Ddraig would have been of the same mind and given them his condolences, but truthfully almost all of them had this coming. His partner had been taken advantage of constantly one way or another over the years, and his only restitution had been half hearted promises that had always fallen short of their intended purposes. It was time for some well deserved compensation with interest.

Issei turned back to the crowd. “In my hand, is the cumulation of three years of constant research between myself and a would-be pharmacist that I consider family. Its original moniker is Solatium Diaboli, or “Solace of the Devils”. A concoction utilizing knowledge gained from the research of Ki, Senjutsu, the Biblical God’s own system, Devil biology, and magic. It is, or would have been, the first readily accessible and mass produced Devil Fertility drug with minimal side effects for parent and child, mitigating the mother’s biological and thaumaturgical rejection of the child as it developed in the womb by nearly *ninety two percent*. And it *would* have been ready for mass production on the shelves four years ago.”

He turned to Carnelian. “For clarification, this is the only properly preserved sample that has been produced.”

The room went ominously quiet, letting his words sink in ominously.

“I-”

“ON TOP OF THAT!” Issei continued, clearly cutting off Carnelian on purpose. “I was also involved in a private project with Heaven to aid and invoke the birth of the next generation of pure blood Angels. Due to very unique services I can provide, I have personally been invited to Heaven and interacted with the Biblical God’s greater system itself several times to accomplish a miracle that has not been witnessed since the height of the Great War. A lone generation of twelve was born as a proof of concept and test before Heaven withdrew contact from me. Not willingly, but of fear of instigating further controversy while the Bael were conveniently busy smearing my name across every faction on the planet!”

A low murmuring of whispers echoed through the audience. True there were rumors of a new generation of angels appearing some years ago that had Heaven elated, but nobody had laid witness to the new faces as they had never been taken out in public.

“Nonsense! What proof do you have if that is true!?” One woman scoffed from the side.

“Echidnael.” The boy shot back immediately. “Rael. Saria. Levi. Zach. Erza. Zadkiel. Adria. Orina. Talia. Yarden. Mickey. I was there when they were named. Hell, I literally baptized them in a cleansing fire with Uriel because the meathead thought the flames of heaven were better to boon them with a long life than a high ranking Dragon’s.”

Those twelve were so obnoxiously blessed with fire that Uriel will probably be out of a job once they finally grow up. Maybe then the Uriel would finally get a hobby and stop bugging others to dick measuring contests whenever he’s bored.

The accusing Devil in question shut up quickly. It was hard to assume that the boy was lying when he spouted twelve names rapid-fire that were in line with what Heaven would use to name their own.

Sirzechs held his tongue. Oh, Michael was not going to be happy when word got out about this. Any information on the twelve of the new generation was kept under the highest security under punishment of death.

“And don’t forget about the Fallen! Might as well complete the set!” His voice was gradually getting louder and more sarcastic. “After playing around with the greater system itself, figuring out the how’s and why’s behind the high infant mortality rate behind the third Faction was almost procedural. In fact…”

With a flick of the wrist, the blue vial in his hand disappeared and was replaced with a large notepad with tags and hand written medical observations appeared in his left hand. “I more or less single handedly wrote an entire fucking manuscript on how to identify, isolate, treat, and care for any Fallen infant suffering from Infanti Ame Damne Hypopeccatum Syndrome! On a fucking budget!”

Two steps. He had been two steps short on finalizing the entire process so that anyone could address the symptoms regardless of what sins the child had affinity to, and the high infant mortality rate for Fallen would have been a thing of the past.

Kiba flinched as he heard Akeno inhale a surprised gasp right next to him. Turning briefly, he was met with the rare sight of the Queen looking absolutely shellshocked.

He knew that Akeno did not like speaking about or even acknowledging her heritage under virtually any circumstance. So, for her to actually react this significantly to the reveal only underscored just how heavy it truly was.

Issei breathed out heavily, calming down once more. Those that knew him could see that he was using his deep breathing exercises to keep his temper in control before resuming his tirade.

“As for why nobody said and did jack all about these very valuable, near revolutionary developments, please turn your attention to Miss Bael here. Shortly after taking actions against me that I’m sure you all have heard about in one tale or another by now, and before I could even wrap my head around the hell was going on, the full power of the Bael family’s resources had conveniently set up a class action lawsuit and forwarded proceeding to a court in their jurisdiction. It happened so fucking fast that before even a whole day had passed, there was a magically enforced gag order on everyone I conveniently associated with. Then, all my personal projects were confiscated as evidence. Including a little charity and research organization I had set up with the Maou and a few other friends that we named Ars Nova. Why it happened so quickly and seamlessly, you could almost say that it had been planned ahead of time! Imagine that.”

“Issei. Please I-urk?!” Carnelian tried to talk, but stammered as something stopped her.

“Fortunately, like you stated earlier, the gag order is still in effect on everyone else even now. Conversation of details regarding the trial made behind closed doors are restricted in public locations or in the presence of unrelated parties outside of approved and regulated venues. I believe the usual standard lifetime of these operations post trial is around ten years.” Issei stated factually.

The atmosphere in the room was growing more and more uncomfortable as Issei rambled on. Nobody wanted to interrupt the unstable teen, whether it was out of fear, or because they wanted to know more about this supposed conspiracy that had happened and apparently blowing up as the seconds went on.

“Now let's see. What else could I rant and blather on about?” He hummed, almost like he was purposefully making a show of all this. With a flick of his wrist the notebook that the bulk of Fallen Kind would outright murder for vanished and was replaced with the blue vial again. Carelessly, it was twirled around his fingers in front of the audience’s eyes, as though taunting them with how little he cared about their futures. “I could go on about how that spike in drug cases among devils was just a desperate long running attempt by the Bael to reproduce the final refined version of Solatium Diaboli. That cheap green shit being peddled around is an embarrassing imitation at best. Oh! Or how about how the Bael blackmailed Zechs to pull their support from me or else he’d quite literally have the system execute his daughter!”

“What?!” Rias gasped and looked at Carnelian in genuine astonishment.

“Issei, friend or not, I advise you be careful what you say next.” Clearly her brother did not take this revelation very well.

“Why?” Issei looked at him confused, “You and Gray-chan really deserve Alicah. She’s adorable. True you weren’t supposed to have more than one child due to the agreements made when you became a Maou in the first place, but the both of you still went out of your way to risk your health and reputations to prove that the drug worked on Ultimate class Devils to bring it to the next stage of review and recognition, even in its experimental stages. You trusted me, and I can and will not ever hold it against either of you.”

Slowly he began to walk around the small space he was granted, twirling the vial and talking.

Talking.

Talking.

Something wasn’t right.

Rias knew Issei. She knew him enough to know that he wouldn’t and shouldn’t be this comfortable being the center of attention. His mindless ramblings were a safety mechanism to distract himself from completely losing control, but there was something more at play.

He was stalling.

For what? For something to happen? To figure something out himself? To make an opening to get out of the building? To make some sort of point?

She didn’t know, but for some reason, she could tell that for once, Issei wasn’t in a rush, and was milking the entire improvised show for all it was worth.

More concerning was that he was so invested in it that he had somehow managed to push down his innate extreme agoraphobia, which was something she never thought he’d be able to manage without some sort of chemical or magical support.

“You know better than anyone that had the gag order not been in place, everyone would have known about how she was conceived. The miracle daughter of the strongest Maou, the first of a new great generation. Over half of the Devil world would have nearly *worshiped* Alicah as the literal poster child for a new era of fertility and generational growth had everything gone as it should have. She could have literally been a symbol of hope by now instead of an unknown hostage to keep you back.”

“I would prefer it if you did not involve my daughter further into this disaster than she already is.” Sirzechs held his ground.

Issei stared at the Maou dead in the eyes, unimpressed, for several long seconds before shrugging and casually moving on. “Fair enough. What else can we talk about then? Oh, how about how the lower class and reincarnated Devils were used as test subjects to try and get a working copy of my drug working, and as a result made a fortune in the illegal drug market while countless women are turned into “strays” and mutants that are killed off as expendable dangers in the process?”

He then proceeded to take out a vial of emerald green substance and a binder of notes.

“Really, there really wasn’t much progress between this batch and the original unrefined samples you stole from me. If anything, what’s been peddled on the streets these days has been altered to be more addictive narcotic and less fertility drug. Too much refining in life rich ki too quickly, and the fact you tried to cut corners and replace the ginseng extract with *mandrake* extract is just embarrassing. Whoever came up with that idea needs to be shot. No. Seriously. Kill the fucker. This swap is just embarrassing.”

The audience looked around uncomfortably and confused as the teen began to lecture and list all the ways using mandrake as an ingredient was a bad idea as though he was a college professor.

“Their innate properties are similar, but anyone with more than an associate’s degree in pharmaceuticals knows that mandrake essence is suited for *treating* extreme magical diseases, curses, mutations, maladies, and spiritual irregularities. Using it for long term natural body performance enhancement on the other hand is a disaster waiting to happen. The short term boost to the magical immune system that mandrakes give the body is almost like injecting pure sucrose and fructose into your veins. Unless there’s a need for jumpstarting the body that hard, there’s no real reason to down anything that intense. Most Devil bodies can’t even absorb and stockpile most of what’s taken in normally which is why it's never taken in raw to begin with…”

He then began to ramble absently about the hazards and stupidity involved with ingesting mandrake essence without medical cause and how the long term kidney and liver accumulation of the mandrake essence mixed with the inherently chaotic nature of Devil magic is among the primary reasons why the overdosers transformed into monsters.

“It’s times like that that remind me that he actually does have a medical background.” Koneko muttered out loud.

“Yeah… should someone stop him?”

“Is that an offer to do it yourself?”

“I’m too terrified and confused of everything to move at the moment.”

“Good excuse.”

“Lucifer! Why are you standing around doing nothing?!” Another noble approached Sirzechs from a safe distance. “If that brat has so much valuable knowledge to us, then why didn’t you squeeze it out of him already?!”

“If you are referring to the drug, then the matter was out of my hands by the time our friend here had his episode five years ago. The gag order was still in place, and part of the damages made during the trial included our friend being banned from conducting any further research or official medicinal practice, and the revoking of all his previously earned accolades and awards. This included the near completion of his Doctorates in Surgery with a masters in applicable white magic, pathology and pharmaceutical sciences, and a bachelors in emergency medicine. The only reason why he has the completed sample shown before was simply because he manufactured it in secret before he was banned from further research. I myself admittedly did not know of its existence until tonight.”

The room was dead silent.

“... Forgive me, but I thought it was mentioned that the boy was thirteen five years ago.”

“He is an exceptionally driven individual when he wants to be, Lord Valac.”

“And Master's degrees are easy as hell to get compared to Bachelors degrees.” Issei absently added in.

“Coming from the child who almost single handedly cured Sleeping Disease in six months and only decided afterwards to turn it in as your project for your Pharmaceutical Sciences degree, which you weren’t even planning on doing in the first place.” In a rare moment of solidarity, Carnelian joined Sirzechs chiding Issei with a tired expression.

“It was Nee-san’s idea. I had most of the credits to pull it off anyways from the other degrees. Shared credits are convenient like that.” Issei waved them off instinctively, completely forgetting who it was that was roasting him at the moment.

“Wait, the *Sekiryuutei* was the one that cured Sleeping Disease?!” Someone from the crowd balked in disbelief.

“It was to cure the mother of an acquaintance.” Carnelian supplied factually. “And it too was part of the confiscated research during the trial and supplied to Ars Nova.”

“Just how many projects that affect society has that monster been a part of?”

“We lost count at around eight.”

“Depends on what your definition of “affecting society” is.” Issei absently mused.

“Don’t answer him.” Grayfia advised the audience.

“This is going straight to Devil tube,” a thirteen year old girl whispered loudly in excitement before grunting in annoyance, “As soon as I can get a damn signal.”

“You too? I’ve been trying to contact the authorities since that monster was dropped on his head.”

“You think the dimensional instability messed with our connection?”

“It doesn’t work like that. We should still have a signal.”

“The hell? My phone’s supposed to be able to access the net from the gap between dimensions and I’m still getting nothing. What’s going on?”

The commotion and confusion gained enough momentum for Sirzechs and Carnelian to take notice, and were confused. Neither of them were responsible for the signal blackout after all.

And then they looked at Issei, who was pointedly looking away from the both of them.

“... Issei. What did you do?” Sirzechs asked.

“Huh?” The teen tried to play innocent and oblivious. Badly.

“Issei, regardless of your experiences and ordeals, you are still one of the worst liars I have ever seen.” Carnelian deadpanned.

“I’m sorry, what did you say? I couldn’t hear it over the hypocrisy of someone that spent over a year claiming I was a pathological liar in court.” Instead of exploding on her, the Sekiryuutei was picking at his ears mockingly.

“Issei, what did you do? Please.” Grayfia repeated her husband’s request with a sense of caution. She didn’t know why, but she didn’t like what she was about to find out.

The teen chuckled, almost mockingly, and sighed deeply. “If you must know, you were there when it was set up, Gray-chan. My… *conditions*, for coming to this disaster in the making. For exposing myself to the world when I very much just wish that everyone would just pretend I had died that day and leave me alone. One set from you. And one, from Azazel, who need I remind you also thought involving me in this clusterfuck was an exceptionally terrible idea.”

The crowd’s nervous whispers grew at the mention of the leader of the Fallen. The fact that their night had been affected by the Grigori in any way at all was reason for concern.

Issei pointed to Sirzechs dramatically. “To the Maou, in addition to ensuring that a certain someone didn’t appear, which they notably failed to do, a set of certain individuals were added to tonight's events. Individuals that were among the original sponsors of Ars Nova. Individuals that knew exactly who I was, what I was capable of, and what I could very well have made in my absence. And boy oh boy do they know things that they do *not* want getting out. And Bird Person knew that too.”

Said individuals shifted uncomfortably, knowing very well they had just been played without even knowing it.

“As for my demand from Azazel, well, that was more of a failsafe measure.” Issei’s amusement died. “In case, once again, I was put on the spot and on display in front of the entire fucking world like some mutant animal.”

“Issei, we didn’t-” Grayfia started, but it was too little too late.

“Tell me, *Snowball*.” The Sekiryuutei’s eyes bored into Carnelian’s, his old nickname for her not used lightly. “What did you expect from the outcome of tonight once you encountered me? Even after all my endless rambling and threats, what did you think would happen? What would the world think, or rather, what would they hear and learn in the first place? That you were once again accosted by the insane Sekiryuutei while *conveniently* visiting your cousin? That the Maou sicced their mad hidden weapon on you in some sort of over convoluted revenge plot? Just how much of what I said tonight would actually make it out to the world unedited? Let alone believed? Or fact checked? What with all these easily bribable and partisan nobles around, it would be easy to muddle up details, mix up facts, and confuse just about anyone and everyone to the point that nobody would care about what happened here within a week with enough second, third and fourth party reports. But they’d all say the same thing in the end. The Sekiryuutei is alive, and caused a disaster at the Phoenix Gremory engagement party. The bare bones of details if that, and leave everyone to make their own conclusions from there. It’s almost second nature for someone like you at this point. You did it before, after all.”

The albino woman frowned slightly in confusion before she suddenly realized what he was alluding to and turned around to see a large portion of the party members with their phones out.

Some were recording.

Others though, were trying to get a signal, and failing.

And suddenly it all clicked.

“Issei, you didn’t…”

“Unless, of course, everything that has taken place in this very room since you appeared, was recorded and played *live* across the entire underworld on every social media platform… and Pornography platforms, for good measure.” The boy stated without any emotion whatsoever, “And conveniently enough, all other signals going in and out of the building are cut off to ensure that you and the rest of our lovely fellow guests would be none the wiser until it’s too late.”

The room was dead silent as everyone there realized they were now at ground zero for a certified shit show.

“Heaven *now knows*. The Grigori *now knows*. All of Devil kind *now knows*. The underworld as a whole *now knows*. Not the Seraphs. Not the leaders. Not the painfully limited numbers of your leftover aristocracy. Not a handful of immortal sociopaths lording over the world so obsessed with the long game that they can’t remember what they ate that morning. *Everyone*. The Bael threatened me and everyone I associated with relentlessly. Holding threats to our families and livelihoods over our heads like the blade of Damocles if we did not play ball. And still you picked apart at every person close to me to feed your hubris and tie loose ends. Well guess what? You made it clear you don’t intend to keep your word. So you can have your war. And I’ve just tied it up nice and pretty on your doorstep to save you the trouble of setting it up yourself.”

o. o. o.

Serafall could only gape at the screen as she watched the mother of all shitshows take place in real time.

“Sirzechs you idiot. We told you this was a bad idea.”

“Lady Leviathan! There’s riots erupting in the streets everywhere!!”

o. o. o.

“Good thing I got some sleep earlier today.” Azazel sighed as he took out a flask and drank heavily from it, though never looking away from the screen. “I wish I could have said that I didn’t expect this coming”

“Governor General!”

“Yeah yeah. I know.” He grunted and stood up. Hopefully his warning to Michael got there in time and he had managed to prepare for the fallout. “Damn it Sirzechs. Would it have killed you to keep that bitch out of the damn building for one night?”

o. o. o.

“Brother…”

“I know.” Michael lamented sadly as Gabriel came to inform him of the rising unrest in Heaven. “How bad is it?”

“Several angels of all tiers have fallen, and there is a growing demand for an explanation.”

“It is understandable, given the circumstances.” He nodded while standing up. “And what of the children?”

“They were fortunately not around any screens or media devices, so they did not witness Issei’s… display. However there is rising demand for our people to see them as well.” Gabriel admitted. “I do not recommend it though. The children are young and still unprepared for being exposed to the masses.”

“Call for Uriel and his men to serve as their guard immediately. The children are familiar with most of them and will take comfort in their support.”

“There will be calls for war for this.” Gabriel sadly stated the obvious, “If not with the Bael, then with the Devils in their entirety for what has been denied to us. They will demand for Issei to finish what he started as well.”

“I’m well aware. As is Issei.” The Seraph shook his head and looked at the screen. “He has tried and prefers peace. There is not a beast that represents “Love” greater than him, and yet this is what he has been reduced to when knowingly denied and terrified of it for so long. It is a failing that we all must share and recognize the consequences of.”

He would be busy tending to his flock for some time. His sermons would be dedicated for some time to the fears of the wise men. The sea at storm. The nightless moon. And the anger of a kind man.

Perhaps he should underscore how appropriate it is by altering it to “the wrath of a gentle dragon” this time.

o. o. o.

Carnelian was stunned. She couldn’t say anything. Not without digging herself a hole deeper than she already found herself in.

She knew that the Maou were suspicious of her actions. That they would prepare for her, albeit non violently. The Bael were the most powerful and influential Devil lineage in the underworld politically for a reason. To the point that it wouldn’t be far off to say that they were the ones that truly managed and ruled Devil Kind, not the Maou. It was the reason why Issei’s side had been pushed into a corner in the first place. Why they had been forced to behave themselves ever since.

Why she had sided with them instead of Issei from the very start, even against her wishes.

She had assumed that Issei would do the same thing as always. Act out a bit, maybe unleash a secret or two to make everyone uncomfortable,, and then give up the focus of the conversation to someone more composed and in control.

She certainly didn’t expect… *this*.

“Ha. Haha.”

And yet for the life of her, she couldn’t help but find the entire thing absolutely hilarious.

“Hahaha!”

Why? Why couldn’t he have done something like this five years ago?

“HAHAHAHaahaha. Ha. Haha. Haaaaaa.”

She couldn’t help it. Even in this terrible position, she couldn’t help but laugh uncontrollably. At least for a little bit.

“Truly, this is a spectacularly irregular night.” The young woman regained her composure with a dying chuckle. “I haven’t laughed this much so often in so long. Too long.”

She had been outplayed.

Not in bits and pieces like other politicians.

Not in some grand chess like game with Maou.

But by the one she had tormented the most, with the elegance of a club duct taped to a foghorn.

Maybe it would have been different had it been anyone else.

How many have done so much for all three factions? How many had produced so many tangible results? How many were more than just petty talk and old money? How many had restrained themselves with the paper thin veil of “proper society” and culture? How many could hook, rope, and ensnare so many important people with his honest charm and potential?

How many had the gall to dismiss it all and announce nearly everything to quite literally the world, and damn the consequences?

Issei truly was one of a kind.

There would be fallout from this. And quite a bit of chaos. But in the end? In the end, there really was only one real option that the leaders of the three Factions had to tame the rage of all three of their populations without everything falling apart at the seams.

Pin it *all* on the Bael family.

Politically there was still some wiggle room, but trying to use that would only make matters worse when the angry mobs of three separate populations were calling for their blood.

Even that old bastard Zerkram wouldn’t be able to get out of this mess without some major sacrifices.

But then again, she couldn’t just up and roll over either.

Carnelian opened her mouth to speak.

“I believe that you have instigated enough commotion for one night, ma’am.”

Only to be cut off by the one person that could possibly make it worse than her.

Sirzechs and Grayfia paled at the voice, while Issei frowned in confusion.

“No. Carnelian, do not tell me you brought *him* with you tonight.” Sirzechs didn’t even try to hide his alarm at the newcomer’s approach. “Grayfia!”

The Maid moved with the speed of a renowned Queen and stopped in front of Issei.

“What the-?”

“We will explain later, but please if nothing else, do not look or listen. Please.” In a rare moment, the maid looked at him pleadingly. Scared even.

Unfortunately, before they could take any measures to cover Issei’s ears-

“I’m glad you are still so concerned for my son, Lady Grayfia.”

Once more, time seemed to stop in the room.

“... Did…” For once Issei had been rendered silent. If only it was for a less severe reason.

“Issei, please-” The maid tried to plead.

“You knew?”

There wasn’t any anger in his voice. No wrath. Disappointment. Rage. Disbelief. Malace. Or even energy.

Just a soft confusion. And hurt.

Grayfia faltered as though she had been suckerpunched. She only then just noticed the way he was looking at her. Gone was the madness. Gone was the eccentric hysteria spawned from trauma. Gone was the scarred teenager.

Instead what was looking at her was something expected on a betrayed puppy.

Oh no.

This was not good.

VERY not good.

It was genuinely safer when he was explosively ranting and angry than when he was in this stunned state.

He had been in this very same vulnerable state of mind just before he went off on everyone five years ago.

Softly, without any power in his body, he tried to push Grayfia away. “... Dad?”

“Issei, listen. We didn’t know about him until three years-”

**“GRAYFIA!!”**

Ddraig’s voice was the only warning she had before Issei’s left arm turned red.

The Maid just barely managed to move out of the way and break skin contact before the coils on his arm went off, causing the space where she once was to ripple and pop. Her momentum carried her to the edge of the large ring of onlookers so fast that the people she stopped near jumped away from her in surprise because it appeared that she had teleported right next to them.

Nobody wanted to know what would have happened if she had not reacted as quickly as she did.

With Grayfia gone, Isssei finally saw his father for the first time in over five years.

Ichirou had always been an unimposing and lanky man with messy brown hair that his son had inherited, glasses, and an easy going casual demeanor that made him feel approachable to anyone.

The polished and clean man standing in front of him next to Carnelian was almost none of those things. Hair slick back neatly. Posh glasses. Straight up and impassive body language dressed in a crisp black and white suit. And a rigid emotionless facial expression. Had it not been for how similar their faces were, it would have been hard to tell they were related.

“... Dad? Is that really you?” Issei blinked as though in a haze, completely oblivious to the world around him.

“It is.” The stiff man nodded.

“Where have…”

“He’s been with me, Issei. Ichirou is my pawn.” Carnelian stepped up next to him. “It was a bit touch and go when I first found him, but we’ve come to an understanding and have worked well since. His previous employers were fools. He barely qualifies as a fighter, but his affinity for administrative class magic and duties is outright absurd.”

“Administrative… I see. So he’s the one that teleported us to the main hall.” Grayfia quickly put the pieces together. No wonder she had trouble detecting and canceling out the circle when it first appeared. It was a spell utilizing and powered by the facilities itself rather than spawned from a single caster. Ichirou must have hacked or usurped authority over the building’s systems soon after they entered the premises.

“Dad’s, been with, you?” Issei’s body shivered and his eyes dilated into nearly vertical slits. His words were broken in a way that almost perfectly reflected just how fractured his mind was at that very moment.

CRACK!

The Boosted Gear on his arm seemed to splinter, with jagged metal edges burst from angles all over the front.

**“Oh no…”** Ddraig couldn’t hold back his thoughts on the situation.

“I thought that… you had gotten away.” He took another unstable step forward, his eyes on no one else but his missing father. “At least you, had managed to get away from me. That you still had a chance.”

Ichirou’s face twitched at the admission.

“Everyone had lied or vanished during the trial. But you… just ran away. Mom almost died. And I… I’m me. I couldn’t leave her alone. But…”

*“It won’t stop.”*

*“They’ll never stop.”*

*“They’ll all just keep on running away.”*

*“They all lie.”*

Small flickering motes of energy lazily began to spawn from the Boosted Gear and whisper malicious words and thoughts to his very soul.

*“They just use you.”*

*“No one will ever stay.”*

*“Their goals will always come before you.”*

*“It will never be enough.”*

*“You will never be enough.”*

*“There is no rest.”*

*“It won’t stop”*

*“You will always be the problem.”*

*“It’s never their fault.”*

*“You keep on letting this happen.”*

*“They won’t stop.”*

*“There will never be peace.”*

*“None are safe near you.”*

*“They will always throw you away eventually.”*

*“Pointless.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Alone.”*

*“She’ll never stop.”*

*“Abandoned.”*

*“Lies.”*

*“Alone. Alone. Alone. AlonealonealonealonealoneALONEALONEA̶̛͕Ĺ̴̹Ȍ̵̼N̸̗͝E̷͓̾A̸̠͋L̵̢̅O̵̗͐N̴̳͊E̴̛͙Ą̶̿L̵̳͆Ǒ̸̧N̵͇͘E̴̛̮!!!”*

**THUMP.**

The air in the building pulsed as world around Issei warped and thrummed with a twisted power enveloped the Sekiryuutei. Only the silhouette of his body and his glowing green eyes were visible in the deep crimson and black pillar that enveloped him. Pure concentrated emotion saturated power immediately flooded the room to the point that only a handful of individuals managed to stay on both their feet without effort.

“This is bad.” Sirzechs stated the obvious with a grimace. He had seen this before, and knew what would come next if he didn’t act quickly.

He only had a few options that might have a hope of working. And even of those, none were without significant consequences.

***“I, who have been kept awake…”***

… Consequences be damned.

“AAAAAAAAAAGH!!!??”

The sacrosanct declaration of the dragon froze.

The power stilled. Even faltered.

The terrified onlookers looked around in confusion to try and find the source of the scream.

And Carnelian Bael collapsed to the ground, bloodied, and missing an arm.

“That is ENOUGH!” The Maou unleashed the full might of his own power, blasting out what few glass fixtures that hadn’t been destroyed by Issei’s own display of might. “CARNELIAN BAEL!! YOU HAVE DISREGARDED A DIRECT ORDER FROM THE MAOU AND ENDANGERED THE GUESTS WITH YOUR RECKLESS BEHAVIOR!”

Sirzechs turned his full attention to the ***raging beast that was just about ready to immolate everything and anything to ensure that the traitor would finally be put to an end.***

“SEKIRYUUTEI! THIS IS **MY** TERRITORY!” The Maou stated with more emotion and ferocity than any Devil had ever witnessed from him. “SHE HAS FLAUNTED **MY** RULES AND DISTURBED YOU IN **MY** DOMAIN!! HER PUNISHMENTS FOR TODAY'S ACTIONS ARE **MINE** TO DICTATE!!”

For almost ten seconds that dragged on for an eternity, the world between the two was nothing more than the clashing might and intent between two of the greatest powers on the planet.

***“You knew.”***

That was all that could be deciphered from the malicious and pained whispers of the enraged beast entombed in power.

Sirzechs nodded but didn’t step down. “He revealed himself two years ago. But none of us could figure out how to inform you. Not as you are. Not without risking this.”

***“Why should I believe you? All I ever receive are lies.”***

“Because you have made your point, and I too am weary of this nonsense.”

Sirzechs reached down and grabbed Carnelian by the back of her neck.

He then seared the open flesh wound where he had obliterated her right arm with his Power of Destruction.

“AAAAAAAAAA!!!”

The woman’s frantic scream rang through the massive room as she writhed in pain for almost a full fifteen seconds.

And then Sirzechs dropped her unceremoniously to the floor.

“Carnelian Bael has knowingly endangered my guests, my family, my name, and the entirety of Devil Kind with War on my territory with her actions. Her arm will be treated, but never healed or replaced. She and her associate will be imprisoned and investigated with the full might of the Maou’s station before prosecution-”

Thump.

A body was tossed in between Maou and Dragon unceremoniously. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be some form of tanuki yokai woman judging from her ears and tail.

“Correction, nya. Associates. Caught her trying to do something to that overinflated chicken in the medical bay.”

All eyes turned to see the SS class Stray Devil Kuroka walk confidently into the circle as though nothing was amiss.

“You boys really need to cover yourselves better. You’re just fortunate I had snuck in for my own bit of personal errands, nya. How sloppy.”

“That’s Carnelian’s Bishop.” Grayfia identified the unconscious yokai almost immediately.

“And not a terrible Senjutsu user either.” Kuroka all but purred, flaunting that she did not have a scratch on herself despite taking down said senjutsu user.

For a second, her eyes flickered over the crowd and made contact with Koneno’s. The smaller of the two stilled on reflex.

And yet surprisingly, nothing came of it as Kuroka turned to the half transformed Issei. “You look terrible Issei-nya…”

***“... You lied.”*** The dragon stated emotionlessly. It was not an accusation but a condemnation that held greater implications than most could fathom.

“I did. And I told it to myself more than you’d think over the years.” The nekoshou's confident smile ebbed away into something more tepid before her unflappable demeanor returned. “Enough about me. You look terrible. You seriously can nyat take care of yourself without a capable babysitter around, can you?”

Before a reply could be made, Kuroka reached into her cleavage and pulled out a dozen paper talismans that she immediately tossed at Issei.

Instead of hitting him though, the talismans floated and danced around the unstable Sekiryuutei, glowing with pacifying eastern magics and arrays in a dark purple light that lasted for nearly a minute until a flash blinded everyone in the room.

By the time anyone could see again, Kuroka was casually picking at Issei’s state of dress, playing with his hair, and essentially keeping him on his feet seeing as he seemed in a near daze, and exhausted beyond what was considered rational if the fact that the bags under his eyes had nearly tripled in size and depth of color were any indication.

“I almost feel sorry for Jasmine. To think she was the one that kept you in line constantly at school while studying.”

“Criminal Kuroka…” Grayfia approached the pair, only to be stopped the moment Issei’s tired eyes met hers.

The maid stopped in her tracks at the stare. She could tell instantly that she was not welcome near him.

“... I’d like to go home now, please.” Issei’s request came out as little more than a whisper.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’ll escort him back.” The Nekoshou smiled impishly to the crowd. “He looks like he’s had a long day. Nya?”

“... The dimensional stability of the property is unstable from the fight. It’s unsafe to teleport outside.” Grayfia advised, coming to the conclusion that there was no point in holding them back.

“My senjutsu’s made of sterner stuff than your basic Devil Magic. We’ll be fine. Can’t risk that traitor and the lost fool opening their mouths again.” The cat girl waved them off before gently guiding Issei out the front. “Come on Issei. We’re going.”

“But… dad…” It was blatantly clear that the teen was out of sorts and barely registered the world around him.

Ichirou didn’t say anything as his son turned to look at him. He just stood there and tended to the unnamed bishop on the ground.

“It doesn’t look like he wants to come Issei. Sorry.” Kuroka apologized softly, urging him to the exit, where fortunately the guests of the building were wise enough to get out of the way without further prompting.

“... You knew.”

“We all did. Eventually. We just, didn’t know how to tell you. Certainly not like this. Jas nyrly broke her silence several times from what Vali told me.”

“Ha. Haha.” It was a dry, emotionless laugh. Completely different from the madness saturated hysterics he had broken out into earlier.

He stopped at the doorway and briefly looked behind him with dead, soulless eyes.

At his father. At Sirzechs and Grayfia. At Carnelian. At Rias and Sona.

“... Congratulations. It looks like you all got what you wanted from tonight after all.”

The Sekiryuutei didn’t look back after that, or say another word. There was nothing left to say.

In a twisted way, the night had gone according to plan.

Rias was the farthest thing from everyone’s lips come morning.