

Chapter 27: Context is important. It's the difference between a night where you get fucked, and a night where you get *fucked*.

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“How is he?”

Rias sighed as she leaned back in her office chair, Grayfia standing in front of her, stoic as ever. Given the nature of their conversation, they were the only ones in the room, and the young heiress was grateful for it. “It's been a week since I got back. He lets me in his room if I want to sleep, but he doesn't interact with anyone at all. He doesn't talk or even react to what you say most of the time. I did think I was getting through to him a couple of days ago when I told him he was starting to smell and needed to take a shower, but...”

“Then he started to take his long showers again.” To her credit, Grayfia didn't laugh or mock Issei's habit of trying to off himself standing up.

Hopefully he wouldn't order catalogs worth of shower heads to the front door this time.

“I promised Asami-san we'd cover the water bills.” Rias gave a half smile, half grimace.

“We provided the same service when we first found out.” The maid nodded understandingly. “Go on.”

“He's a mess. What else do you expect at the moment?” Shaking her head, Rias went back to Issei's mindscape. She had made minimal progress through the inferno flooded cave, barely making it a third of the way through now compared to the quarter when she first started. It was progress, but barely notable given the circumstances. “No eye contact. No verbal response. Severe aversion to physical contact outside of a handful of circumstances. Minimal physical response to being addressed if any. He sleeps even less than before, and if my familiar didn't accidentally catch him slipping to the kitchen in the middle of the night I would have suspected that he's given up eating altogether considering how much weight he's lost. He's completely shut down and shut out everyone.”

It must have been what his old group of friends and acquaintances had witnessed and experienced five years ago. It had bewildered her and Sona as to why they all looked relieved whenever they saw how abrasive and scathing Issei was every time he opened

his mouth, but compared to what she was witnessing now she could understand their feelings completely.

There were few words that could describe him better at the moment than “lifeless”. He was literally and willingly wasting away in his room.

“I assume you aren’t the only one that has tried to help.” Grayfia pressed onward, showing no reaction to Rias’ frustration.

“He unlocks the door for Asia with some pushing, but otherwise doesn’t react any differently to her than to me. Kuroka and Asami tried once but...”

“They are still in hot water regarding his father.” Grayfia nodded with closed eyes. There was only the slightest of inflections in her tone that indicated that she was remorseful of their situation.

“I still can’t believe that Carnelian’s butler was Issei’s father.” Rias pinched the bridge of her nose as she recalled the stiff man she had shared a handful of conversations with over the past three years. The father and son may have had similar facial structures and hair, but they carried themselves completely differently. Throw in the fact that Ichirou had his hair perpetually slicked back now and was actually polite, and nobody would ever see the connection unless they purposefully looked for it... which may have been the point in hindsight from Ichirou’s position.

“It was a difficult reveal when we first discovered what became of him as well. Make no mistake, we have tried to contact him to explain what is going on, but he’s rebuffed every attempt firmly.” This time Grayfia did allow herself to show some remorse, underscoring just how badly the situation affected even her. “His initial disappearance hurt us all. Ichirou-sama is a good man. Asami kept Issei in line as a child, but Ichirou was the one that kept him grounded in reality and could turn him away from his obsessions.”

And wasn’t that a major loss? They all knew several ways to calm him down in one way or another, but pulling the Sekiryuutei away from his derangements was another herculean trial in itself.

Issei must have truly loved his father. Which only made the recent revelation hurt even worse.

Unfortunately, now wasn’t the time to dwell on the wayward man’s peculiar situation.

“Speaking of calming him down, where’s Jasmine? I thought she would be here by now.” Rias pressed, changing the topic of conversation. She didn’t like the woman, but she knew that Issei adored her like no one else.

“Occupied. Unfortunately, we suspect your cousin did not limit her actions to simply your party. We found out too late that the terrorist organization that was brewing under Ophis’ wings had become the subject of a peculiar rumor over the preceding weeks. Rumors of a “cure” to the symptoms and repercussions from Ig Alima’s haphazard experiments and drugs.”

“... The Ouroboros Dragon was making a *Terrorist Organization*?” Rias asked slowly, clearly indicating that this was news to her and something that she probably would have liked to know sooner.

Grayfia, to her credit, didn’t so much as twitch. “By the time the group garnered our notice, it had accumulated multiple concerning parties and factors that caught all three Factions’ concerns and attention. Jasmine and Vali are double agents tasked with ensuring that these factors have as minimal influence over Ophis’ decisions as possible while limiting the organization’s actions and identifying critical threats. The rumors I mentioned have severely restricted the actions they can take without making the situation critically worse.”

That was putting it mildly. The Khaos Brigade had been swamped with new recruits since the party, and Jasmine had barely managed to get enough time to herself to report what was going on to the Maou and the others before running off to put out another fire. It had gotten so bad from the reports that the leaders of the three factions had sent out additional spies undercover just to serve under Jasmine to lessen the load so that she could tend to the desperate patients coming her way and actually notice anyone notable joining the terrorist group... and there were many.

The last message they received indicated that it was impossible to hold the organization back for much longer just by intimidating the leaders with Ophis’ word and Vali’s intimidation. It had simply grown too large too quickly and Ophis rarely directly showed up in person much to begin with.

Worse, was that word of what happened to Issei had finally reached Ophis’ ears.

And she *wasn’t* amused.

“Yes. And to be frank, its existence is still vastly preferable to her moving herself.” Grayfia affirmed.

Rias held back a groan. Things were snowballing out of control and she was at the center of it, like it or not.

Focus Rias. One traumatic revelation and job at a time.

“So she can’t come and help then.” She succinctly summed up Jasmine’s situation.

“No.” Grayfia agreed. “Judging from your tone, Kuroka’s has been unable to provide as much aid as we had hoped.”

“Issei doesn’t react to her or let her into his room unless it’s something actually important.” Rias shook her head. “She’s been helping Asami keep order in the house, keeping the mood up, and answering questions.”

Kuroka had also asked Rias on occasion about Koneko and lightly pressed for a chance to talk to her sister, but the younger Nekosho has been reluctant to give her sister an opportunity. Not that anyone blamed her. Trauma aside, Koneko’s animal instincts put her on edge whenever she got close to Issei’s home on a good day, let alone recently.

Grayfia slightly shook her head in frustration. “A pity. Next to Jasmine, Kuroka was the best at calming Issei down whenever he was agitated. Turning into a cat and letting him pet her did wonders for his temperament. Animals and familiars were always on alert around him given his nature, so he never had a pet despite his desire for one.”

Chalk up another tally on “Issei is lonely and repressed as hell as a consequence”.

“I’ll try to push Koneko a bit harder on it. Maybe arrange something outside Issei’s home if possible.” The Sekiyruutei always seemed to be hung up on the issues of others despite how he acted. Informing him of the sisters making up might put him in a better mood.

“Mmm. And what of Asami?”

Rias had the decency to cringe. “She’s... trying. Kuroka, Asia, and Raynare are looking after her and the property around the clock. She isn’t allowed outside as often as she wants, but she still pushes to do her work at the local animal shelter to get her mind off things.”

“Supervised?”

“Of course.” Rias leaned back in her seat. “Grayfia, I can’t keep this up knowing only parts of the story. If you expect me to have any hope of getting through to Issei, I need to know the details of what exactly happened. Issei literally is just going to waste away at this rate.”

The maid looked at Rias skeptically before closing her eyes, clearly at debate with herself. “I would inquire if you are willing to risk yourself and your peerage pressing this matter, but that would be hypocritical at this point. Instead, I will make another point of inquiry.”

“Oh?” The redhead looked at the maid with a tired, but curious gaze.

Said maid looked back at her firmly. “I am well aware of the conditions regarding your powers stemming from your fathers side, and how closely you keep your individual specific attractions private. Be that as it may, I must ask, does Issei fulfill your personal conditions? Is that the reason why you gravitate towards him so fervently?”

The room became eerily quiet. A line had been crossed, one that was not traversed lightly.

“Hah.” Rias cracked first, groaning like a child and breaking the severity of the situation. “No doubt Brother and Father had developed a hypothesis as my Peerage grew, and noted how conveniently they were found.”

“I see.” Grayfia didn’t even try to hide the small shimmer of pity in her eyes.

The heiress’ smile was weak, but genuine. “Please don’t look at me like that. It’s not that bad. Nowhere near the burden Sirzechs has. Nor Issei’s.”

“His situation was a product of our incompetence. You are as much a victim as he is. You should hold no responsibility for what happened.”

“And yet I am picking up after the mess.” Rias’ good mood soured. “I can’t keep this up knowing only half stories and vague hints, Grayfia. If you want me to do something about Issei, let alone successfully, I need to know everything. In detail. Skirting around the problem and sensitive topics is what landed us in this absurd mess in the first place.”

“Are you certain of that? Even Issei has put in significant effort to ensure you and your Peerage was spared of the worst of this nonsense. Involving yourself any further, tying yourself to him to that extent will not spare you all a second time.”

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say as Rias looked at her sister in law in genuine irritation. “So having me cluelessly strung along by both my brother’s and my cousin’s machinations to the point of having me *marry* one of the ones responsible for Issei's current situation is fine? But me knowingly making my own decisions isn’t? I understand I have not reached my full maturity, but I can only stomach so many insults to my competence. Especially by those that, in your own words, have failed more than they have succeeded.”

“... Hah.” Surprisingly, Grayfia broke character not to express anger or remorse at the severe lashing she had been given, but genuine amusement. “I had informed your brother as much when I brought up this possibility. Perhaps it is due to how much he cares for you that he still hopes to coddle you needlessly, even now. Even if it’s that very mindset that has landed us all in this current disaster.”

A magic circle later placed a large manilla folder in the maid’s hands, catching Rias’ notice. “You came expecting the conversation would go in this direction.”

“It is not that difficult of an expectation.” The elder woman’s tone grew stoic once again. “In my hands is everything we have about Issei. His strengths. Weaknesses. Habits. Achievements. Relationships. History. Facts that would drive him to kill if ever brought up in conversation. And facts that even he does not know about himself.”

“Are you *serious*?” Rias didn’t even try to hold back her irritation and exasperation at this point. As eagerly inquisitive as she was at times, even she was reaching her fill when it came to world shattering secrets that hurt people close to her.

“It’s not that outlandish, for the most part. Issei was very adventurous and reckless as a child and had multiple mishaps that required his mind be wiped. The majority are rather humorous in hindsight.”

There were roughly a dozen and a half in total, and Issei referred to them as “the Memory Files”, the corresponding number depending on what order they came in, with Ddraig providing a warning and the memory number whenever Issei was at risk of potentially repeating the same mistake unknowingly.

He had already identified roughly half of them to Grayfia’s knowledge, and for the most part treated their discovery like a twisted game.

He even had a bingo card set up with them listed on it, though he hadn’t made any lines just yet.

Memory number one was actually a bundle, containing his earliest experiences with Ghost and his bi-annual... trials. Each one until he was nine was kept suppressed to protect his mind from the pain induced trauma he experienced.

Memory number two was when he had overboosted the flavor of some food he was making and had rendered himself into a sobbing mess wanting to “go back” before trying to cut out his tongue because “reality without true flavor was pain”.

Memory number eight was making an experimental dragon aphrodisiac as a side project and accidentally sprayed it everywhere while putting it away for storage... he and Vali both requested to have their memories wiped for that one.

“I assume that the rest are the ones I should pay attention to then.” Rias was not amused by the way Grayfia dodged her concerns.

Grayfia’s amusement died as quickly as it came. “... One or two may be of interest and use to you. It would be best to see for yourself rather than hear it from me.”

It must have been particularly bad or outlandish if even the “Strongest Queen” deliberately avoided going into detail about the matter. Lovely.

Rias was so preoccupied by her internal grumbling that she didn't notice Grayfia hold out the folder until it was right in front of her face.

"I recommend reading over the initial page carefully. There's some parts in there I believe you'll find useful to understanding Issei better."

Slowly taking the documents and opening it, she quietly noted how easy it was to get them. Then again, with how quickly Grayfia took them out in the first place, Rias suspected that the Maid intended to hand them over in the first place.

"This goes without saying of course, but what you possess is confidential. Even Sona is not to know of the contents without permission or prior warning."

"I doubt she'd want to know even if offered. Issei likes teasing her more than me when he's in the mood." Rias absently noted as she looked at the top page, which was an official profile on the Sekiryuutei in question.

"Issei Hyoudou. Age. Address. Birthday. Sacred Gear. Blood Type. Natural Elemental affinities are abysmal across the board outside of a horrifying talent for fire, a barely moderate one for wind and... huh. He has a natural affinity for time-space manipulation?"

"To a mediocre degree at best, but a rare trait regardless. A byproduct of his other Sacred Gear. Outside of that, mastering Dragon Gates, and some minor rudimentary applications, he has not explored it that much." Grayfia supplied. "He did not see much practical use for it when achieving his goals."

"And yet he obsesses over the far more common Lightning and White magic despite having no talent in them. Yeah, that sounds like him." Rias didn't even know why she was surprised at this point.

She grabbed the cup of tea on her desk and began to drink while noting the way that Grayfia was staring at her, clearly expecting something. She hated that feeling. It made her feel like she was the butt of some joke that hadn't dropped yet.

Her eyes went back to the paper to try and find what she was missing.

Bank accounts (that's a bigger number than she had expected). Personality (nothing particularly new there). Psyche profile (went down and to the next page. She'd read that in depth later with a couple of bottles of headache medication on hand). Notable accomplishments (forwarded to another page as well. Should be an interesting read). Estimated strength and threat level (continental threat when agitated, minimal when passive, not that she was expecting anything less given his history).

Attribute as a Dragon. (Sleep and Pa-?!)

“PFFFFFFFFFFFFT!!!” Rias choked and sprayed the tea she was drinking across the room.

Grayfia, despite sitting right in front of her, did not suffer a single drop. Instead she simply sat and waited quietly as her host coughed loudly to clear out her lungs for the next minute and a half.

“Are you well?” The maid asked innocently as Rias gave the woman a death glare.

“Are you (cough) serious?!” Leaving decorum behind, the young woman slammed the paperwork down on her desk. “*THAT’S* his second attribute?! All this time?!”

“I assure you, everything I have handed you has been confirmed and verified if not by our sources then by Issei himself at one point or another.” The elder woman did not so much as flinch.

“This is, I don’t even know where to begin with this!” Rias struggled to regain her breathing as she looked at the lone word that sent chills down her spine.

In a world where mystics and concepts held far more weight than gold ever could, having a core concept like *THAT* in one’s being would turn heads on its own.

Having it in a *Dragon* of all things, let alone the Sekiryuutei, escalated matters to the scale of nightmares.

No wonder everyone had paid such attention to Issei even as a child.

Suddenly, countless random facts about the young man in question sprung up in Rias’ mind, all falling perfectly into place.

*His dream was to have The Harem.*

*He is mindlessly obsessed over women. Their care. Their health.*

*He prepared for years for The Harem.*

*He was never meant to be alone.*

*The problems and issues of those under his watch severely irritated him.*

*Other dragons immediately took note of him and were up in arms when he went on his rampage.*

*He always did whatever he pleased.*

*He was naturally numb to the authority of others with few exceptions.*



*He was exceptionally protective of those he considered his.*

*His growth rate was exceptional.*

*His attribute awakening at a young age was detrimental to his mental growth.*

*Carnelian's betrayal and her supposed attacks to drive everyone close to him away literally drove him mad.*

“By the Old Gods and Devils...” Rias sagged back into her chair and looked at the paper again, finally comprehending the depth and damage that had been done to Issei.

“I hope you can see why so many have had such elevated expectations of him since the beginning.”

“Don't even start.” Rias had lost any patience and good will she had for her sister-in-law. The revelation put so many things in context in hindsight it made her shiver unconsciously.

Everyone's constant repeated questions about getting closer to him than she already was made far more sense now. Getting any further attached with Issei would cross a line that would make things incredibly awkward and potentially dangerous to try and backtrack from. In more ways than one.

The irony left a bitter taste in her mouth, and for a moment she genuinely started to have second thoughts on what she was doing.

And then she remembered her interactions with Issei. How he acted. How he spoke.

How he looked at everyone when he thought they weren't paying attention.

How he gave backhanded advice hidden behind his surly attitude to prevent anyone from being grateful despite benefitting from it.

How he curled up in the back of that heavily modified cave, alone and wasting away, trying his hardest not to hurt anyone anymore.

Rias closed her eyes and forced herself to calm down. “... Why haven't the other dragons taken him in? From how they've reacted to his treatment, I have a hard time believing they would haphazardly antagonize him.”

Grayfia shook her head. “We asked the same thing for a time, until we realized the answer was the same as the problem. Dragons are emotional and instinctual beings. Issei, being as damaged as he was, required special care and time to recover. Care that Dragons in general do not usually have the temperament to carry out. While they would not dare harm him once they realized who he was, they would treat him differently and act on

their own prerogative. Both due to his ordeals and what he is. Leaving him in their care would do neither party any favors. Lady Tiamat in particular was rather difficult to persuade to let go of the matter.”

“Tiamat...” Rias frowned, remembering how terrified of the Dragon King Issei was. “... Wait, if her Attribute has a strong affinity with Issei’s, and given her legend and reputation... is Tiamat’s actually-?”

“I reiterate. Lady Tiamat was VERY adamant in taking Issei under her wing and protecting him.” Judging from her expression, Grayfia was not at all enthralled with the memories and events she was referring to.

Rias would learn later in the documents that erased memories number five and nine involved Tiamat’s most successful kidnapping attempts.

“She’s not going to try and barge into the territory and cause a scene due to this latest disaster, is she?” Rias grimaced, knowing in her soul that was a very real possibility given recent events.

“... Fortunately, no.” The Maid’s answer clearly indicated that something just as unpleasant was probably going to happen in the near future.

“Grayfia.” Clearly, hiding more secrets was not high on Rias’ endearment list.

“I’m afraid that’s all I can inform you on the matter. Lord Azazel is currently the one in charge of negotiating with the Dragon King. I have yet to be updated on their progress.” Grayfia politely bowed in apology.

“And you were going to update me on said matter when?”

“Whenever the concluded negotiations and current situation deemed it appropriate.”

“Of course.” Rias wasn’t holding her breath. She made a mental note to tell Akeno to prepare for a Dragon King’s arrival within the next week and hope that the worst they had to deal with was some extra snark and maybe some half hearted fire thrown their way. “Are there any other bits of information or potential guests I should be expecting soon that I should be aware of?”

Please say no.

“Yes.”

Damn it.

“While late, the representatives from Heaven that were expected to supervise Issei are anticipated to arrive in Kuoh within the next few weeks. We will be forwarding you their

information in the following days and coordinating for their arrival to prevent any confusion.” If Grayfia noticed Rias’ displeasure, she didn’t show it.

Lovely, puppets from Heaven. Or the Church.

Rias sagged into her seat and rubbed her temple. “So long as they are updated on the current situation and don’t cause any problems, they should be fine... they *won’t* cause problems, will they?”

“No. Both guests have been specially chosen for this task. If I could point out a flaw in them other than being slaves to Christianity, it would be that they are both holy sword users.”

The redhead barely managed to hold back a pained groan. Right. Kiba’s unresolved issues with the Church and Excalibur were infamous among her household. “I’ll keep that in mind. Anything else?”

“No. None that have passed checks and security. Several parties have obviously requested access to the Sekiryuutei, however they have not received permission.” Fortunately, Grayfia ran out of surprises to bestow her.

“I hoped as much.” She’d have to let Sona know what was happening soon. It was a coin toss whether or not Serafall would inform her sister of these developments by now, but given the circumstances it was a terrible idea not to keep the other manager of Kuoh up to date on their arriving guests.

“I see I have left you with much to contemplate and review. I have delivered everything that was required for now. I will come by again soon to check up on the situation.” With a polite bow, the maid gave a roundabout request to leave.

“You can go... one last thing though.” A thought crossed Rias’ mind. “How are they? Alicah and Millicas?”

A faint and bitter smile flickered on the woman’s face. “... They’re managing. Little Ali is confused and scared, but Millicas is the big brother she deserves and more. I wouldn’t be surprised if he knew more than we told him about what was going on. He actually met Issei a couple of times when he was little for a small medical checkup and looked up to him a bit.”

Rias paled, the idea of her nephew acting like Issei horrified her. “What?”

“Just a bit.” Grayfia’s smile widened. “My son thought Issei was a funny dragon with the way he kept everyone on their toes. He found the way that Issei just did what he wanted, exploring, cooking, learning new skills, medicine and the like, without any hesitation whatsoever regardless of his limitations, inspiring.”

An unexpected snort escaped her mouth before she could stop it. A funny dragon huh? Well, from a child's perspective Milicas wasn't exactly wrong.

But, look what happened to that funny dragon now.

"I'll let you know if anything happens." Rias sighed and picked up the documents on her desk to read them again. "And please keep me updated on this terrorist group of Ophis'. I know it's not supposed to be something I get involved with, but with the way things have been heading..."

"I shall have relevant documents ready for you and Sona upon my next visit." Grayfia bowed again, a magic circle appearing at her feet. "Farewell."

A flash later and it was just Rias in the room.

"Haaaah." She shook her head. "Everything was supposed to be easier once Riser was dealt with."

She turned a page.

It had a list of memories that Issei had wiped from his head at various points in his life. She started to skim them now, intending to go over everything else now and pick at the details later.

First involved something regarding a feedback with the powers of the entity in his other Sacred Gear that caused him severe pain a couple times a year. She'd have to talk to Asami about that.

Second involved... boosting food so much that it tasted too good and he immediately had withdrawals like a severe drug addict? Heh. Yeah. That sounds like something he'd do. If he ever got better, she'd have to try out an enhanced dish just to see what it was like.

Third involved keeping his first teacher, the Fallen Angel Baraquiel at his home too late and accidentally preventing him from... protecting his... wife and daughter...

"GRAYFIA!!!!"

She was going to remember this. Strongest Queen be damned, she would get back at that damn woman one way or another.

o. o. o.

Eight years ago:

"Cooooooooool."

“Hahaha.” Carnelian laughed nervously as two masked familiars dressed like clowns with a smiling and frowning mask respectively floated around her. “That’s some pretty high praise coming from the Sekiryuutei.”

“He’s probably just thinking how to use us for porn.” The frowning mask snarked.

“Now now. You know he’s smarter than that. He’s still just a child in more than one way.” The smiling one chided.

“So this is your Sacred Gear?” Issei didn’t take his eyes off of the familiars.

“Yeah. Harlequin Congress.” The half devil smiled sheepishly. “It’s not all that special. I did my research. It’s a pretty common Sacred Gear. All it does is allocate my emotions, both positive and negative, into familiars. The more I feel and put into them, the stronger they get.”

*“Oof. Don’t knock those powers of yours kid. Emotion based ones can have one hell of a kick if used right. Or wrong. I know from experience.”* Ghost spoke up from Issei’s right hand.

“That bad? Even for you?” Issei looked down at his hand curiously.

*“My first wife was an empath and nothing else ability wise. And she fucked with a LOT of heads. Even by my standards.”*

“Even you? The supposed absolute death of the omniverse.” The frowning mask familiar asked so skeptically they could literally hear the air quotes around his title.

*“She considered me her magnum opus.”* The normally cheerful man replied with a dead flat tone.

“...”

“...”

“... That suddenly explains far more about you than I think we needed to know yet simultaneously revealing very little.” Issei blinked owlishly, getting nods from Carnelian and her familiars in agreement.

*“That’s the usual reaction most people have when I tell them.”* And like that the foreign powerhouse’s flippant personality returned once more.

“If it helps any, I have no intention of producing any people like you. I don’t think my peace of mind would be able to handle it.” Carnelian offered.

“We wouldn’t.” The familiars agreed in unison.

“*Hahahaha!*” And Ghost was back to laughing at everyone’s misery again, so everything was right with the world.

“Random voices aside, no wonder you’re so smart, Snowball!”

“Come again?” Carnelian and her familiars asked, confused.

“I mean, those familiars are technically still you, and Sacred Gears are super flexible when it comes to pushing minor rules, so you can easily multitask and study three things at once with them!” Issei, as per usual, ignored everyone around him as he let his mind, and mouth, run on autopilot.

“We can what now?” The smiling familiar looked at her partners, its mask looking twitchy.

“You have got to be... THIS IS WHY I REGRET THIS!! HE MAKES US LOOK STUPID AND STILL WANT HIM TO THANK HIM FOR IT!!” The sad familiar on the other hand began to rage.

“Ghost says that that just means I’m real good at being helpful.” Issei obliviously bounced on his seat with a pleased smile.

“YOU’RE NOT HELPING!!!”

“But you said I was.”

“*HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!*”

“Okay, that’s enough of that.” Carnelian sighed, mentally commanding her familiars to disappear into balls of light that shot to her face, no, her glasses and reformed as the lens in front of each eye. “For your information Issei, no, I didn’t use my Sacred Gear to study like you did, though it would have made things significantly easier in hindsight.”

“So I *am* helpful.”

“Issei. Focus.”

“Kay.”

The young woman sighed. The Sekiryuutei really was a handful, but unlike the vast majority of people in the world, human or demon, Issei was shamelessly honest with his feelings.

In fact...

*“She likes us! We’re helpful! She’s gonna be part of The Harem!!”*

What Carnelian didn't tell Issei was that her glasses enabled her to see and hear the "positive" and "negative" emotions of others without their knowing. It displayed "what they felt" and "what most impacts their emotions" more than "their thoughts exactly", so it wasn't as intrusive as other mind based Sacred Gears. She knew secrets she was better living without. And secrets that had enabled her to live and skirt around dangers. As an unintended consequence though, it had also severely reduced her faith and interest in people in general.

Issei on the other hand...

*"You fool! It is still too early! We must show that we are consistently helpful! Not just for her, but for the others! For The HAREM!!"*

*"You are absolutely right!! I am a fool! I must reflect and improve!! For The HAREM!!"*

*"FOR THE HAREM!!"*

"Harem." Issei nodded confidently, completely oblivious to the mask wearing mini dragons hovering above his head screaming their heads off with their insane battle cries.

It was hilariously cute in a way.

The boy was an open book with a one track mind, with or without her Sacred Gear. It was rare for Carnelian to encounter anyone whose positive and negative inclinations were so blatantly in tune with one another and not be a natural pessimist or psychopath that looked down on everyone around him. Or infants that had not been polluted by the cruel ways of the world just yet.

In short, he was one of the few types of people that her Sacred Gear was next to useless on.

But that only underscored why people trusted him so much.

He meant what he said to the point of insanity and stupidity. Like one of those comic book characters that despite being an utter moron seemed to get to the heart of issues effortlessly and address them without so much as a moment of hesitation.

Only he was actually smart in all the ways that mattered when people and politics weren't involved.

He studied hard. He knew the importance of money. He knew the dangers of power and magic. The value of staying healthy and being happy.

And yet they were all just building blocks that didn't matter to him other than to achieve to his goal. A goal that had never changed in intensity or focus.

‘The Harem.’

It always led back to that for the kid. She didn’t know how or why he had decided that having a bunch of girls around you was something to dedicate your life for. Women were two faced bitches. She could attest to that. Keeping a bunch together and not having the group eventually erupt into a cataclysmic shitstorm was wishful thinking at best.

The more she watched him, the more Carnelian was amazed that anyone could obsess over such a perverse goal, yet the ‘sex’ and ‘power’ part of the equation was clearly somehow a minor detail in the grand scheme of things. She doubted even puberty would change that mindset of his once it finally did hit.

Still, it was nice to know someone cared for you to that extent. Insane or not.

She hadn’t seen anyone look or treat her like he did, with genuine unfiltered affection, since her mother passed away. With and without her Sacred Gear.

Maybe that’s why even that bitch Jasmine fell for his absurdity and goes along with this nonsense.

He was someone they could trust. Someone that would never hurt them.

“Issei. Do you know why I hid my Sacred Gear? Why I hide being a half Devil?”

“No. But people are jerks if they think they can get away with it, so you probably thought it was for the best.” As expected, the boy didn’t seem to care about the significance of her condition or abilities at all. It didn’t change how he saw her.

For the briefest of moments, Carnelian had second thoughts about what she was doing. What she was about to do.

“You don’t have to tell me.” And as if on cue, the normally completely oblivious Issei read her like a book. “If it bothers you that much, I don’t have to know.”

Ironically, his kind words only convinced her otherwise. “No. You should. Just in case.”

“Just in case?” Issei tilted his head to the side confused.

Instead of saying anything, Carnelian merely sighed and lifted a hand up to eye level and focused her Devil powers.

She wasn’t strong by any measure, but her ability itself was anything but, as evident as a cracking of crimson lightning and a white orb formed over her fingers.



“Whoa. That kinda looks like... ooooooh. So that’s why.” To his credit, the boy didn’t back away from her or look alarmed at the revelation. He only cringed, as though he had just seen someone take a nasty fall.

It wasn’t hard to see why. The Power of Destruction was a pretty notable skill with an even more notable legacy and lineage to carry it.

“I’m pretty sure you noticed by now that I try to avoid any meetings and events that take place where Maou Lucifer shows up.” Carnelian elaborated.

“Yeah. It makes sense. Devil nobles have a bunch of annoying rules that hold Zechs and the others back at times. Finding out about you would probably trigger a half a dozen of them. No wonder you stonewall Bird Person even though he clearly wants you.” Issei nodded more to himself than anyone.

And wasn’t that a running joke in itself? It was a common gag to see Riser pine after her more than Issei did, with offers and the like to join his peerage and be under his protection.

Not that it would do any good. The Phoenix family were powerful, especially recently with their financial gains, but they were still jokes compared to the Bael family.

“It’s not like I’d go with him even if I wasn’t part Devil.”

Issei sparkled.

“And it’s not because I like you more.” She deadpanned.

“You like me more than Bird Person.” The idiot only heard the parts that he wanted, like usual.

“I want to live, Issei.” Stating her desires brought the boy back to reality. “Mom gave everything to me before she died. She raised me by herself. I was poor and teased and everything you expect coming from the lower class in Chicago.”

“Ugh. *Chicago*.” Issei shivered. He had gone there once for a porn convention a few months ago. The venue and people there were as low budget as their STD prevention standards.

“*The bastards dare to call that abomination of theirs pizza.*” Ghost growled, clearly having different complaints in mind.

“I’m like Jasmine, Issei. I wanted to break free from monotony. But where Jasmine wanted to thrive with the power she gained with her own two hands, I just wanted to be free of this nonsense. To be on top of the world and enjoy myself. Enjoy my life. No

worries. No debts. No depending on others for handouts. No crowds or people breathing down my neck. And yes, maybe enjoy the high life every now and then doing something I like.”

“Cool. So what’s the problem?” Issei nodded confused, clearly underscoring that he had no intention of getting in her way.

“The problem is you Issei. Or rather, the attention you draw to yourself.” Carnelian sighed, leaning back in her seat and pretended to not notice the look of shock and horror on the boy’s face as though he had committed some unspeakable crime. “I’m more than happy to be part of your group. You. Jas. Kuroka. Even Riser. You’re all the closest friends I’ve had in years. But with all the chaos you get yourself in and all the big names watching you. One slipup...”

“And they’ll fuck around and find out!” Issei smiled cheerfully like he normally did, but there was no hiding the pure aura of violence that had suddenly spawned around him.

It didn’t help that his hilariously unstable facsimiles hovering over him had turned into borderline rabid unstable facsimiles.

And there it was. The other side of Issei that rarely showed its ugly head unless certain boxes were ticked. And her safety happened to be one of them.

Carnelian couldn’t help but be touched by how dedicated he was to her, even though she never agreed to be part of “The Harem”.

“Or. *Or* we can reduce the odds of that happening.” She stressed to calm him down again. “Maybe train me so that I’m strong enough so I don’t need this power if I’m in a pinch?”

“Oh. That’s it?” And like that the violent aura was completely gone as if it didn’t exist, with nothing but a young boy looking up at her curiously. “Yeah. We can do that. Actually everyone was more or less thinking of dragging you off to catch up with the rest of us soon anyways.”

“I... wait what? Catch up?” Carnelian blinked. “Everyone agreed on this? Even Jasmine?”

“Yeah, but they were thinking along the lines of making you less likely to be another “accidental casualty to my madness”, or whatever.”

“... How kind of them.” She was touched. She truly was. “What about Jasmine? She’s just a human, isn’t she? Even I should be stronger than her, with or without my Devil Powers.”

“She’s also been around me for a year, works in porn, and experiments with drugs. She’s got her hands on so many ingredients and compounds that while she doesn’t look like it she’s already physically superior to most low class Devils, Angels, and Fallen.”

“Against my better judgment, what does porn have to do with...”

“Stamina.”

“Right. How silly of me.” Far be it for her to question a professional sex worker’s ability to keep going. Especially one that had been caught in Issei’s special brand of madness.

“Oh. Speaking of Nee-san. Why don’t you two get along?”

Carnelian held back a groan. If Issei was older she could just get away with giving him a dirty look for a few seconds to make him stop, but unfortunately the Sekiryuutei was still completely inexperienced and oblivious when it came to reading certain cues.

She and Jasmine didn’t hate each other, but Issei was right in that they didn’t get along. They both had similar difficult backgrounds, clawing themselves up from difficult situations. The real issue was that they disliked how the other treated and approached their situations and goals.

Carnelian wanted to play it safe, work hard, and earn enough to be free without attracting any attention to herself. She didn’t like it when others stared at her like she was some sort of prize or tool to be used perpetually.

Jasmine wanted to *succeed* and achieve *her* goals by any means necessary. Even if it meant humiliating herself in the short run. She wanted to be rich, famous, and be on top for her reasons and successes, even if the foundation was a bit shaky if anyone ever bothered to dive into her history and reputation. It didn’t matter how much attention she drew and who knew about her. The end results were all that mattered in her eyes

To put it succinctly, Jasmine took chances and stuck her neck (and legs) out when she thought they were necessary to get something done to have a fulfilling existence. It just so happened that she didn’t count many people as part of that endgame until Issei came into the picture, though you had to get her very drunk or in a certain mood and setting before she’d ever openly admit it.

Carnelian on the other hand avoided risks like the plague whenever possible. She followed the rules. She kept her head down. She excelled magnificently when it came to politics, paperwork, and management, but she made a point to never draw attention to herself other than being “that one girl that could get the job done”.

By all rights, it was pure dumb luck that she had been assigned to Issei in the first place, and it was only after a few months being with the group that the teacher that

recommended her for the task admitted that they had expected her to bail from the group's insane activities after the first few weeks.

The two simply could not comprehend how the other got as far as they did in life.

Of course, the fact that they were both in the same circle as Issei only made their predicament even more bizarre.

Not that she didn't have other friends... that she mostly only talked to... every other week or so...

"Lets just say... I'm not as naturally aggressive as she is."

"Why are you getting depressed Snowball?"

"... Can we just focus on the training please?"

"But you got that depressed cloud thing going again."

"Do you want a hug?"

"Hugs!!"

With practiced ease, Carnelian caught the child literally diving into her modest chest for a full body hug and sighed as he snuggled with her. The boy really was too easy to deal with at times. Almost like a hyperactive puppy in human form. It was why everyone close to him could deal with him with moderate ease for the most part.

He was a handful and frustrating to deal with at times, but she had to admit, it was nice to have something to cuddle every now and then to relieve the stress.

Maybe that's why Jas and Kuroka liked having him around. Unlike the rest of the world, he actually cared about them.

In the back of her mind Carnelian made a mental note to open up to the boy more often. She couldn't rely on certain traits of her Sacred Gear to take the edge off a life working herself to exhaustion forever.

"Heheheheh." She pretended to ignore the satisfied giggling originating between her breasts.

Also, she needed more friends.

o. o. o.

“As much as anyone likes a free lunch, I can’t help but be concerned about the strings attached.”

Rias, Akeno, and Asami sat at a local stall waiting for their food during the eldest’s lunch break. By all rights it looked like nothing was amiss.

Which was exactly the point given that the stall was temporarily being hidden by magic, their conversation was kept private by a silencing barrier, and the area had no less than half a dozen Devils for security.

Still, kudos to Asami for playing it cool given the circumstances, even if she could barely sense a fraction of what was going on around her.

“While normally I would like to play coy for tradition’s sake, skipping the usual wordplay and games will serve the least painful route just like it does with Issei.” Rias picked up her menu and looked at it with interest.

“That’s a first.” The elder scoffed before looking at her own menu.

“As interesting as this conversation will be, I’m unsure why I’m here for it.” Akeno was last to touch the cheap paper. “Should I remove myself?”

“No. Unfortunately you have a part to play in this Akeno.” Rias denied her Queen’s request.”

“Oh my. I’m not sure how to react. Should I be flattered or concerned?” To her credit, Akeno remained unflappable and merely tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“I thought you were going to avoid the mind games.” Asami looked up from her menu with an annoyed stare.

“It’s a difficult topic to cover. Much like how you would try to talk to Issei about a matter he would actually react to.”

“Ah. So that’s why we’re having this conversation outside the house. Lovely. I thought you had had your fill of this nonsense, but apparently not.”

Rias held back a grimace. Clearly Asami was still not happy with any of them and had the patience to match. “To be fair, this was information that I had only been told as of yesterday. It took me some time to come to terms with it, among other revelations. I’m still resolved to curse out my brother for only bringing me up to date now.”

“More secrets that I should have been aware of from the beginning then. Why am I not surprised?” Asami immediately flipped the menu to the alcohol section and called the waiter over. Clearly she wanted to take the edge off before blowing her top.

“Rias?” Akeno looked at her King with the slightest bit of trepidation. The fact that she was supposed to be present for this conversation and yet still didn’t know the reason why did not leave her with a good feeling.

“Feel free to order something as well. We may not be of age here, but I doubt anyone would take exception once we get going.” It was only then that Akeno realized that Rias had been on the alcohol page of the menu from the start.

Even Asami had noticed Rias was acting more flippant than usual and gave the girl a curious glance, but didn’t comment on it. Not yet at least.

Fortunately they didn’t get to the disaster that was to come immediately. While they were no strangers to alcohol, Rias and Akeno were new to sake, and after a few initial questions the three had a rather lengthy talk about the brands and types of the regional drink while placing their orders and pretending that nothing was going to go sideways.

It wasn’t until their salads had arrived and they had all gone through their first cups of alcohol that Rias decided to get to the point of their private meal.

“I had a rather informative discussion with Grayfia yesterday. She offered to bring us back to the underworld, with how stressful everything’s become. Asked if I was committed to risking myself and my peerage to attempt to help Issei.” The redhead leaned back and stared at the ceiling wistfully.

“Why didn’t you? Between your position and the attention, helping Issei doesn’t benefit you at all.” There was something in Asami’s tone that was hard to pick out. A mix of skepticism, expectation, sarcasm, mild dry disbelief, and something else all wrapped up into a unique blend that Akeno couldn’t decipher properly.

Judging from the wry smile on Rias’ lips though, the latter did.

“Childish pride, initially. The sort that tried to run away to the human world and take on a Devil and Peerage with genuine experience and double our numbers. Pride that came from being around someone that helped me with something I couldn’t do myself, yet I barely did anything for myself. Pride in that I’d never forgive myself if I walked out of this mess at this stage after being involved and used in it as badly as I did without my knowing. And, admittedly, some spite for my brother and the Maou for thinking they could tell me what to do at this point as though I was an incompetent child. What better way to give my brother more work and make him worry than to stay?”

“And Carnelian?” Asami was completely unreadable with her short question.

Rias’ lips twitched slightly. “They call her the Ivory Star Princess, and me the Crimson Ruin Princess back home. After what she tried to do to me, I’m not adverse to spilling a bit more red on white in the future. Family or not.”

“You certainly proved as much when you tore apart that dress that Riser made you wear.” Akeno giggled politely, recalling how her King unceremoniously tore apart the gaudy formalwear viciously once she had some privacy before literally blasting it with her Power of Destruction.

“Tch. I’m assuming that pompous child’s tastes still haven’t improved in the slightest.” Asami made a comical cringing face. Riser may be Devil nobility, but not once had he ever gotten the upper hand on Asami in a conversation once she put her foot down.

“To put it as simply as possible, imagine a wedding dress with all the frills designed for a budget adult film.” Rias made a similar expression. “Even Devils have standards. I had to be careful walking everywhere or else my breasts would fall out of the damn thing.”

“Mhmm.” Asami eyed the girl’s large bosom. “If my son was here and not mentally dead to the world, he’d be ranting about this being a prime example why his “magic boob physics” study needed more funding.”

“Ara. It’s hard to believe how seriously he takes such silly things, but every now and then even I do see the benefits if his hobbies bore fruit.” Akeno giggled politely, making a brief gesture to her own notable mammaries, “It took me quite some time to get used to these once they started to grow in earnest, and there aren’t many ways to get them under control comfortably.”

“If you two are trying to make me jealous, try again. I’ve spent the past ten years dealing with Kuroka and Jasmine and those girls are faster to whip out their absurd goods than a preteen boy shooting off dick picks for his first girlfriend because he thinks that’ll impress her.” Asami gave both girls an unimpressed dead stare.

“Ahahaha.” Rias and Akeno had the decency to look embarrassed. It was easy to forget that Asami was just as brutal at shooting people down for their nonsense as her son at times.

Truly the gap between a gifted girl and an experienced woman was a greater leap than they presumed.

“... I do like Issei though, as bizarre as it sounds.” Rias sunk back into her seat with a small flush. “Some of it is for private reasons, but he’s not a bad person. Just... bad at people. And it’s only gotten worse because of all these stupid games of ours. I don’t blame him for reacting the way he has, even if it does make everything difficult. He just hates seeing people that are close to him get hurt because of him no matter how hard he tries to avoid it.”

“That idiot boy. He’s always takes everything so seriously.” Asami shook her head. “It’s endearing at first, until you realize that he genuinely does take any self implied failure too

seriously. Any time he thinks he's made a mistake he genuinely panics and rushes to fix it as soon as possible. He's been like that since... well since he's been a child."

Rias grimaced as she noticed Asami's momentary lapse of memory. "Actually..."

"Actually?" The woman blinked in confusion.

"Memory file number three?" The redhead offered hopefully.

"Memory file?" Akeno echoed, confused.

"Number..." Asami inhaled stiffly before closing her eyes and forced herself to breathe out slowly to calm down. Nodding to herself and licking her lips, the woman took a moment to reign her temper in, and then finally downing the last of the sake in her cup in a single swig. "Care to explain in detail? And why it was determined I shouldn't remember it either?"

"I believe it was to prevent you from potentially reminding him by accident. Issei... accidentally caused an unexpected disaster to be worse than it should have been when he was young, and took it extremely hard. Even with his memory wiped, the trauma stuck and left him with a responsibility complex, or responsibility OCD. It's why he panics so severely whenever he believes he's made a mistake. And it's also specifically the reason why I brought you two here."

"Akeno, to sum up what a memory file is, it refers to one of the dozen and a half events in my son's past that were so outlandish, stupid, and/or traumatizing that your kind decided to wipe his mind of them so he could somewhat function as a human being again. But there's only a couple that necessitated that *my* mind be locked as well. And since these memories happened sequentially and I remember what prompted numbers two and four, three should have happened when he was roughly around eight years old."

"That is interesting, but what does any of this have to do with me? I've never met Issei or his family before." Akeno frowned, confused.

"No but... Akeno, please promise me that you will stay calm and stay till the end of this." Rias looked at her Queen seriously.

"Rias, what are you-?"

"Akeno. *Please*. I'm asking as your King and your best friend to trust me. I'll answer any questions or concerns you have afterwards, but for now please go with this."

Akeno didn't like where this was going one bit, but she trusted Rias with her life. Her King had never put her in this sort of position before since their first meeting, so the fact that she was doing it at all, let alone now underscored how important it must have been.



“I don’t know what’s going on, but if you think it will be that bad, I expect you to compensate me adequately later, Rias.”

“That’s all I ask.” Her king let out a relieved sigh before turning to Asami again. “There are multiple ways to do this, but I think the best way is to just remove the mental block on the event in question. It’s been there for years, but the magic itself is pretty simple. So long as you focus on events around the block and push against it slightly, I can easily identify it on my end to dispel.”

“Sounds simple enough. What do I have to think of?” Asami asked confused.

Rias’ smile was strained, knowing that this is where things would start to get difficult. “Baraquiel.”

“What.” Akeno’s flat one word sentence held absolutely none of her usual air and grace.

“Akeno. Remember what you just promised.” Rias focused on Asami.

“But-”

“Akeno.” The Gremory’s tone took on a harsh tone.

“Is this something I should know, or something that, well, I “should” know?” Asami asked, confused and slightly concerned.

“In all honesty, we’re about to find out.” Rias lifted a hand and rested it on top of the woman’s head. “Please, try to remember the last few times you saw Baraquiel. His behavior. What he was doing. What was going on at the time?”

“Baraquiel was the first person among the Factions we met.” Asami slowly recalled the man, falling into a pseudo trance. “He was a gruff but kind man. And patient as a saint to deal with my son as long as he did. No sense of imagination though. Took things far too literally, no doubt a result of fighting for so long. We all liked his visits. He was Issei’s first teacher about the underworld and its cultures. He even got my son started with lightning magic. We knew Ophis for years by then, but she didn’t care the slightest about how the different cultures worked.”

“My... Baraquiel taught Issei? You knew him?” Akeno balked at the very idea of what she was hearing.

“That’s right. Baraquiel was the first person in the Factions to find Issei.” Rias soothingly agreed, her hand glowing on the woman’s head. “He came over frequently. You became friends. Close enough that you planned on doing more, right?”

“I... yes. I remember Issei being extremely excited the last few times we saw Baraquiel. We were expecting something. Issei spent at least a week preparing the house. He even willingly learned proper traditional Japanese etiquette, which he hated and avoided normally. He was constantly asking Baraquiel questions about... about...”

The woman slowly paled and turned to look at Akeno like she saw a ghost. “... You.”

“Me?” The accused’s anger about her past being dredged up was momentarily smothered by genuine confusion and bewilderment.

“Himejima. Your mother’s name. You’re Shuri’s girl. I... the magic stopped me from even remembering her?” Asami shivered and tried to recollect her slowly surfacing memories.

“You knew my mother?”

“I met her a couple of times with your father’s help, but we became friends almost instantly. Baraquiel got along with us so well he thought that the rest of our families would have no trouble getting along too. There weren’t exactly many humans he knew of that were remotely “normal” enough for you or Shuri to meet with without complications. The extended family on your mother’s side weren’t exactly social from what I’ve heard. I didn’t know her long, but your mother was a wonderful person that seemed to calm anyone down with a few words. And Issei... oh, you have got to be...”

Asami looked up with a look of restrained frustration at the bartender. The magic around where the tree women sat disabled itself when the inhabitants intended to interact with the staff. “Master. I’m going to need something strong and fast please.”

The undercover Fallen behind the bar took one look at the woman and nodded, knowing better than to ask questions.

“I’m going to kill them. Azazel and Sirzechs both. And kick Baraquiel in the balls for good measure for allowing this to happen.” The woman growled murderously as a glass of hard liquor was placed in front of her.

“I already called dibs when I found out about this yesterday. You can have them afterwards.” Rias scoffed, sharing the woman’s feelings.

“Putting Shuri’s and Baraquiel’s daughter right in front of us and not expecting everything to explode? Were they hoping Ddraig would cover their ass so Issei wouldn’t find out? On top of the nonsense that Riser and Carnelian were pulling?! Without warning me?! The fuck were they thinking?! Were they actually expecting *me* to be the one to deal with it?! Even Ghost had more sense than that! And that cosmic asshole practically gets off of shit like this!!”

In spite of their growing concern, confusion, and other emotions brewing from the revelation, Rias and Akeno wisely kept quiet as the thirty six year old woman downed half her drink in a single go, which was never a good sign.

They did almost jump when Asami snapped her head to Akeno again with a furious expression, only for it to melt into one of genuine sorrow and kindness seconds later. “Ah. You look so much like her now that I can see it. Baraquiel used to go on and on about how the two of you gave him reason to keep going after he thought the war killed his heart.”

“That man isn’t my father.” Akeno hissed furiously. “It’s because of him that my mother died. The Himejima clan came after us because I was a Fallen. And Father was late to protect mother because of his duties.”

Asami cringed and looked away, back at her drink. She opened her mouth to say something, then stopped. Several times at that. That is until she finally bit the bullet.

“No.” She uttered a single one word sentence and shook her head before grabbing her glass and downing her drink like it was a shot and motioning for a refill.

“No?” The Queen was more angry than confused. “What do you mean “no”? You weren’t there. You didn’t see my mother get killed!”

“I wasn’t there to see you attacked. But... I was there to see why Baraquiel was late.” Asami sighed heavily, looking straight ahead and avoiding eye contact.

“... What?”

“Azazel, the Fallen, weren’t what held up Baraquiel.” The mother looked up, lost in her memories. “... Your father was supposed to bring you over the next day to our home. To meet us. To meet Issei. He wanted it to be a surprise since you apparently didn’t have any friends to talk to given your situation.”

“A young Issei and Akeno having a playdate.” Rias chuckled to herself. For some reason, she could easily picture it in her head. It was overwhelmingly cute.

“Issei... Issei was in a similar boat as you. With how he messed with his head. Studying constantly with his Boosted Gear. Interacting only with Ophis and Ddraig and Ghost as the people closest to him... my son wasn’t exactly used to socializing with normal humans either, let alone ones his age. He was over the moon about meeting you when we told him. He was genuinely happy about having someone his age he could finally talk and relate to.”

Akeno looked like she had been suckerpunched.

“I mean it. It was all he could think about for the week up until the date. He wanted to know everything about you so he didn’t screw up. Birthday. Favorite color. Favorite food. Hobbies. Likes. Dislikes. How to talk to you without being too rude. He bombarded Baraquiel every time he came over with questions and advice so he wouldn’t make a mistake or scare you off. And just in Issei fashion, it was cute for a while, until it just became annoying. But, your father was your father. Stern and patient, and he put up with it. Probably because he wanted the two of you to get along just as much as Issei did. And... well... he stayed with us a good half an hour longer than he intended.”

“You’re telling me... that my mother is dead, because Issei was asking questions about me?” Akeno trembled with barely withheld rage.

Asami snorted and looked at the girl with pity as she took another glass of alcohol and drank from it. “Child, your saint of a mother is dead because your extended family is full of insufferable and literally racist cultists. She was by far too good for their low standards, and suffered because of it. As much as you don’t want to hear it right now, neither my son nor your father are at fault for what happened. Their only crime was not noticing or paying more attention to those failures of human beings before disaster struck.”

“But my father could have-”

“We both know that the world is full of countless minor “could’s” and “would’s” that would have made things better. One look at my family is proof enough of that.” The mother shook her head. “Sit down. There’s more to the story that I’m certain neither of you heard yet.”

“What else is there for me to know? My mother is dead because you son prevented my father from protecting us.” Akeno coldly growled.

Rias didn’t have the nerve to point out that two seconds ago Akeno had been laying the blame of her trauma completely on her father.

“How about the part where you “miraculously” avoided your extended family’s hit squad for over a month and survived “without help” alone in the city?” Asami rolled her eyes and made air quotes.

“By my... what are you talking about? Nobody helped me back then until I found Rias.”

“Oh sweetie. I know you’re angry, but use that head of yours. Do you really think a child barely ten years old managed to avoid multiple experienced and specialized mystical hunting groups for that long without something happening in the background?” The woman laughed bitterly as she finished her second drink. “Or did you think you really were that good at running away and hiding from everyone while peddling charms and talismans on the streets?”

“Peddling... you *knew*?” The half Fallen was literally starting to get dizzy from all the revelations.

“We all did. The only reason why you weren’t picked up sooner was because everyone was busy trying to deal with those backwards dumbass cousins of yours and keeping damages to a minimum.” The woman recalled the memories as they finally came back to her. “It didn’t take long for us to figure out something was wrong when your father didn’t show up or answer our calls the days after he left. Issei, being the nosy little shit he was at that age, was the first to find out exactly what happened, and didn’t take it well. Hell, he actually ran off to try and find you before Ichirou and I knew things had gotten that bad. And it went about as well as you’d think it did.”

“He got lost?” Rias asked knowingly.

“Ophis found him in *Hokkaido*. Issei had never used his Sacred Gear for long distance travel before then and he supposedly overshot Kyoto eight times, landing himself all over the country except where you were. If what Ddraig said was true, my idiot son landed himself in *Canada* at one point somehow.” Asami laughed with bitter amusement. “We had to ask for Ophis to bring him back, and from the way she tells it, she actually had to knock him out after chasing him to Hawaii. He was completely irreconcilable with what happened and blamed himself completely, which in hindsight probably contributed to his absolute shit sense of direction then.”

“And that stopped him from trying again?” Rias probed further. Issei was many things, but he did not give up that easily when that upset.

“No. But the barrier Ophis set up around the house did.” Fortunately for Asami and Ichirou at the time, they could leave whenever they wanted. It was just their viciously upset child that couldn’t.

And oh did he try.

“As amusing as this sounds to you, how on earth does this explain my supposed “success” at hiding from the Himejima clan?” Akeno was reaching the end of her patience once again.

The older woman looked at her knowingly. “Because that’s when my son showed just how absurd he could get when he truly dedicated himself to a cause with everything he had.”

Cork boards. City maps. Investigation teams. Security footage. Rumors. Police documentation. To an outsider, the boy went from zero to apocalypse prepper in record time.

Not only just on Akeno, but on the Himejima squads, the Fallen teams sent to the area, and even the local members of the Church that just happened to be there as well. Issei had notes and profiles on literally everyone of note in the city.

“It was like a hidden silent war was being held in that town with you in the center. Issei was up for three weeks straight moving information and money around like he was some criminal mastermind with his life on the line. He used his Boosted Gear to the max, amplifying everything to do with his intelligence and cognitive functions to get and utilize as much information as he could to be of help, and researching everything and anything that might be of help. He gave the hunter groups false information and led them into traps for your father to exploit. He pit the local Church and the clan against one another three times. Hell, Baraquiel and Azazel didn’t figure out it was Issei making their jobs easier for them until the middle of the second week. They thought one of their underlings had hired a team of mercenaries to provide support. Even then there were a couple of close calls from our side that had Issei nearly bash his head against the barrier a few times. I think one of them involved a fortunate stray cat.”

“A cat? But I don’t... wait... you don’t possibly mean...”

“Akeno?” Rias asked, concerned.

“It was one of the few times I was almost found by the clan. I was in an alleyway, but a stray cat on the other side knocked over some trash and distracted them long enough for me to get away without getting noticed.” Akeno shivered. “How did they know that?”

“The clan hunters weren’t the only ones looking for you there that night. One of the old men you helped with your improv exorcism side business was singing your praises up and down the street the days after the job and pretty much everyone heard him. If you stayed longer, you would have seen one of your Father’s men kill the clan members there.” Asami shrugged. “Issei was frantic trying to get that information to Baraquiel on time for that one.”

The woman’s look of mirth slowly died as she recalled more facts. “Fortunately, and not, my son was still only eight at the time. No, eight or seventeen, he has his limits. And he hit them face first. He had been up with minimal rest or time to recover for almost three weeks by the time your father’s forces purged the Himejima from where you were. Issei was trying to find where you were hiding to have Baraquiel to finally get you, but his body hit his limit and he collapsed unconscious. He didn’t wake up for three days, during which you vanished again.”

Asami reached the end of her story with a tired huff. “Since you clearly *violently* desired nothing to do with your father after what had happened, Azazel and Baraquiel had to indirectly take care of you. How Sirzechs got involved is beyond me, but I doubt it was completely coincidental that you were found by Rias so soon after things calmed down.

Given how you showed to poorly react to anything related to your father, or Fallen as a whole, introducing you to Issei would not end well for anyone, since, as we all know, my son doesn't shut up. Nor could we just tell Issei to drop the matter when he woke up, even if you were safe. So, we blocked his memories of everything that happened. Ichirou's and mine too, since we couldn't trust ourselves to not let something slip accidentally if Baraquiel was brought up. And, you know the rest."

Judging from how viciously Akeno was shaking, the teen was either busy trying to comprehend what she was hearing, or struggling to accept that she did "know the rest". Slowly she looked up and gave Rias an accusing glare.

Her king shook her head. "Don't even go there. I really did find you by accident, Akeno. I wasn't even *supposed* to be in Japan at the time. I forced my brother to bring me along when I heard he was going to Japan. Uncle Okita had been selling me on how amazing this country was since I was in diapers. I had no idea why or if he really was trying to find you himself. If you want to find out if there was a conspiracy between your Father and my brother with you in the center, I'm more than happy to arrange it and contribute to the severe chastising he likely deserves."

"..." Akeno's complexion was pale. She was sweating profusely. She couldn't muster to say a word.

In short, she was clearly on the verge of doing something extraordinary stupid if something wasn't done.

Asami shook her head and put her glass down. Then, before either girl could react, moved straight to the distressed girl and hugged her tightly. "Don't. Whatever you were about to do, don't and just relax. I'm not your mother, but she would have done what I'm doing right now if she could."

"Let go of me. You're not mother. Don't speak for her when you barely knew her!" Despite being overwhelmingly stronger than the woman, Akeno had trouble breaking free.

"You're right." Asami soothingly whispered. "I barely knew Shuri. But I know she loved you. Just like your father still does. And I know far too well that they'd be destroyed if they saw you broken up as you are now without help."

Rias wanted to interject that she could help too, but she knew that Akeno needed someone with a more motherly touch right now.

"Issei was the same way back then, when things were bad with Carnelian. He was smiling for no reason all the time. Just like you are now. Claiming everything was fine. We didn't want to push him. Make him panic like you are now, even when he was still hurting. When the pressure was still growing daily. By the time we realized we had to

step in and help, we were too late. That bitch beat us to him and the worst happened. I'd be doing your parents, you, and my son wrong if I didn't at least try to help you."

Rias' eyes widened slightly at the quiet admission. If her guess was right, then she had just figured out why Issei disliked Kiba and Akeno ever since he laid eyes on them.

"... Why?" Akeno's question was little more than a whimper. "My Father's a monster that killed people."

"You know Issei's total is bigger."

"You don't even know me."

"We'd like to try and make up for last time. My son certainly tried before."

"I'm not even human."

"Everyone knows humanity is overrated."

"I'm just a vile woman."

"My son's been a rampant porn addict since the age of five. Though in hindsight, I guess that says more about me than it does about him in a way."

The weak laugh that escaped from Akeno's lips was a pathetic thing that died as soon as it was heard. "... Still. Why?"

"That's a question better made for your King. I only just remembered this disaster ten minutes ago. She'll get her thrashing soon enough. But if I could hazard a guess? It's because she's your friend and thought this would do you some good." Asami kindly answered while rubbing the crying girl's back. "And, knowing how you Devils hate being decent people for the sake of being decent, I'm assuming that once, or if, you were better you'd be able to help my idiot son, somehow."

"Me? What could I do? Issei hates me, let alone remembers me. I doubt he'll even let me into his room."

"You can thank Rias for that. If it was before I wouldn't have considered it, but she's gotten him to at least open the door on occasion. If she and I ask and tell him it's important, he might give you a chance. As for what you could do? I think you already have an idea of what might work. And fortunately for once, it isn't breasts."

o. o. o.

In his room, Issei suddenly had the feeling that someone was uttering blasphemy... but he didn't have any motivation to act upon it.



“Issei? Do you want to talk yet?” Asia appeared from behind his couch.

... Nor did Issei feel the motivation or energy to scream or react to the *damn ninja puppy that had somehow snuck in his room again*.

“Oh! A twitch! Wait, does that mean yes or no?”

That’s it. He was double locking his room again.

“You stopped watching porn! That’s good, right? What are you getting from Amazon?”

If it weren’t for his depressed state, Issei would have been self aware enough to ask himself some questions. Questions that would have impacts in the future.

Questions such as, did he leave his door unlocked in the first place? How long had she been in his room? Why did she not react at all to the porn he was watching?

It was probably for the best. He would have barricaded his door and doubled down if he did.

o. o. o.

“Fufu. I don’t know. I’m pretty sure my breasts would help dealing with him.” Fortunately Akeno had calmed down enough to joke, though it was blatantly clear her heart wasn’t in it. She was still trying to distract herself.

“We all do, dear. My son is a lost cause when it comes to those ridiculous things, but for once they aren’t an actual answer to getting him to behave.” Asami rolled her eyes.

“More importantly though, your father-”

“No.” The girl’s reply was fast and sharp, her body stiffening like a board in fear before she forced herself to calm down again. “No, I... not now. I know but, not now.”

“Alright. That’s fine. No need to rush. I have more than enough experience to know how to pace things.” The offer was withdrawn as easily as it arrived. “Though if you don’t mind, I will tell Azazel of this progress. After tearing him apart for not warning me about you being here of course.”

Asami could already see how this played out from Baraquiel’s perspective. His wife just died and daughter was attacked. The boy and related family inadvertently preventing him from protecting them in time. His daughter going into hysterics every time his name was even mentioned, let alone pressed with the idea of what happened. The Fallen Angel was a veteran of countless battles and tragedies, but he was not used to being a family man or dealing with the delicate nature of children.

There was no questioning that he loved his daughter though. A more stubborn parent might have tried to risk everything and push the matter, but Baraquiel only needed to read the report of just how badly Akeno was traumatized even talking about him to decide that he absolutely did not want to see it for himself and risk making it worse.

So, he trusted Akeno with Sirzechs and the Gremory family. A Devil family particularly well known not just for their power and influence, but for how well they took care of their underlings. His daughter was technically with the enemy as far as the outside was concerned, but in a twisted way it only added a layer of comfort for Akeno who recoiled at the very mention of Fallen.

As for Akeno, the severely traumatized child simply needed something or someone to blame it all on. Logically she should have done so on the culprits themselves, but odds are they had all stayed out of sight or cloaked the entire time, preventing the girl from putting a face to her nightmares. So, she subconsciously applied the next closest related image: her father's. It didn't help that she desperately did not want to associate anything bad with Shuri after her murder to ruin the woman's memory.

And as such, it all snowballed from there.

Asami genuinely pitied both father and daughter. At the very least the two had a hope of possibly reconnecting after this unexpected talk.

"I think that crude man actually likes you. Most in his position hate being beaten around by the same woman so many times." Akeno was slowly regaining composure, allowing herself to make a crude joke like she always does.

"Azazel likes any woman that takes care of herself. He just enjoys playing with me more because I'm an untouchable in his book. You know how stupid boys are."

"And then some." Akeno smiled, her complexion slowly returning, but still far from fully recovered. Breaking back from the woman, she took in a few slow breaths and tried to smile like she usually did, but couldn't quite maintain its prior luster. "I think I need some time to myself for now. Rias?"

"It's fine Akeno. I'm sorry about springing this on you. On both of you, but I thought that it would be the best to talk this out fresh so there wasn't any confusion."

"No confusion," she says." Asami rolled her eyes. "You're paying for the drinks for this, and I am not letting you get off easy."

"That's fine by me." So long as it helped with the current situation, her brother had essentially given her a blank check. A corroded liver or ten wouldn't raise any questions.

“And you hold my hair back when I’m puking it all up again.” Asami lifted a hand up to keep the liquid fire coming while Akeno took the distraction to leave the building.

“... Still acceptable.” This time Rias’ smile was less genuine.

“Get used to it girl. You’ll be doing plenty of it in college.” Issei certainly did. Jasmine partied *hard* when she wanted to.

“I’ll take your word for it.” The noble heiress shook her head, sipping at her own drink. “While we are here and swapping stories though, I hoped you could regale me with a few that caught my attention when I was reading up on Issei’s profile.”

“Master! Make it a tall!” Asami already didn’t like where this was going.

“So, can you explain what exactly happened to make Issei literally banned from Christmas?”

“Ugh. Not that story again.” How the hell was anyone to know that the cosmic horror in her son’s hand had a one sided “best assassin ever” rivalry with all the Santa Clauses’ across the cosmos?

Three days later, Rias was still debating whether or not all the tales she had heard was worth holding Asami’s head out of the toilet of the bar for almost an hour was worth it.

o. o. o.

He grit his teeth in frustration.

If there ever was a time to make a move, to gain attention, to spread the truth, it would be now.

But, the ideal venue to conduct his plan and announce it all, why did it have to be *there*? His plans would literally die on arrival from all sides if he even approached the locale.

There were other options. Easier and less guarded locales and targets that would enable him to achieve almost everything he desired before the fools even had a chance to stop him.

***No. It had to be there. It had to be where HE is.***

He shook his head. Those damn traitorous thoughts. They have been more frequent ever since the world turned on its head recently.

***You have the resources. The contacts. It’s more than possible to achieve your goals.***

... That was true. The chaos had stirred the pot. Ophis' organization was gaining attention, but that wasn't the only one deviating from that annoying prattle that the Factions were preaching.

***Hurry.***

But he'd have to move quickly. The window of opportunity was narrow and there were too many major names involved and watching in this latest disturbance to assume that this current state of affairs would remain for long. Someone would make a big move soon.

***This is an opportunity. Act in Ophis' name. That group of hers will be as paralyzed by the inrush and chaos as the Factions are.***

That, actually could work. Ophis was the one everyone was wary of. Now more than ever with those drug rumors flying about and the Bael heiress being the focus of nearly everyone's crosshairs. His admittedly minor in comparison, yet growing organization was still relatively unknown. Still able to move freely. But growing all the same

Still, getting in and out of that territory was ***possible***. He'd have to call in some, no, all the favors he had left to pull it off. Especially if he wanted to survive or escape the fallout.

He'd have to make some changes to the original plan and contact some of his spies.

***You'll need more. If there was ever a time to call in a favor, it would be now.***

Ngh. If he was going for broke, he might as well, even if the thought sickened him. That one obnoxious bastard was always interested in events that would turn the world on its head, even if the coward rarely stuck his neck out more than necessary. Odds are he'd just send an semi capable underling or two that nobody could trace for an overwhelming cost, but even that would be welcome.

But, if the rumors about him were true, then the plan might catch his interest enough to send a bit more if he explained a few key details.

... Yes. Yes. This actually could work better than he originally planned if he moved and timed everything right.

A plan was slowly formed. Names were drawn. Predictions were made.

And the next morning, his men moved.

o. o. o.

Omake:

Clack. Clack.

Clack. Clack.

In the kitchen, Raynare and Asia sat around the table.

Clack. Clack.

The former with a stopwatch. The latter with a curious assortment of metal tools and equipment.

Clack. Clack.

Click.

“Time!” Asia smiled proudly, holding out her success in her hands.

“Two minutes forty five seconds. You shaved off another seven seconds. Not bad for a nun.” Raynare smirked as she looked at the device in her hand. “You’re getting better. Let’s see if you can hit sub two forty consistently by the end of the day.”

“Right!” The cheerful girl nodded as she pushed the classic lock back into place.

Raynare had to admit, she did not think that teaching a highly impressionable nun how to lockpick so said nun could unintentionally screw with the Sekiryuutei by sneaking into his room could be so fulfilling.

Clack clack.

“Oh darn it! The turntable slipped.”

But oh was she going to enjoy the ever loving shit out of it once the idiot learned what was going on.

Clack clack.

Especially since step two involved actually teaching the “ninja puppy” how to sneak around properly. She had even picked out the most adorable sexy little ninja outfit for the girl when the time was right.

Clack clack.

Sekiryuutei or not. Porn addict or not. Her revenge would. Be. Glorious.

“Time!”

Yesssss. Just a matter of time.

“Raynare-san? Why are you laughing like some of the priests that I was told to stay away from at the Church?”

Oh Heavenly Father, I renounce your name, but thank you for making your lamb such an idiot.

o. o. o.