

Chapter 27:

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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.” Grafia 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 about him he would 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 of certain events. The majority are rather humorous in hindsight.”

There were roughly a dozen 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.

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 result 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 with me.” 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.

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