

Chapter 24: It's that chapter where the silly character stops being silly and people go "oh shit".

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

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

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

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

Something was very, *very* wrong.

“... Issei?”

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

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

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

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

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

While Rias refused to have anything in common with Riser as a person, she couldn't help but suspect that they were sharing the same sinking feeling that they had both been

played unknowingly, and the consequence of their ignorance was the incredibly pissed Sekiryuutei that was radiating pure *murder* halfway across the room.

“Bird Person.”

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

“I asked you a question.”

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

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

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

The Sl███████ ██████████h was once more awake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Literally redefined into "violated rapture".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You really were alive."

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

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

“Time you never had.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The silence in the hallway was ominous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sirzechs’ body began to radiate and glow.

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

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

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

“Huaaaaghghaah!!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Issei is Rias' classmate." Sirzechs answered simply. "He was invited as an associate of her's."

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

“That’s what I bughlfkjgh!!!” Issei tried to contribute to the conversation. And failed.

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

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

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

“His *what?*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Whoalghglakdhg!!”

Riser personally interpreted that as Issei agreeing with him.

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

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

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

Even when the idiot approached him from behind.

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

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

Riser grimaced just before it happened. “Fool.”

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

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

There was a full two seconds of silence.

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

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

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

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

God he hated that lame name.

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

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

The room was silent for a good three seconds as everyone tried to figure out what exactly radiculopathy was, much less get over the shock of the crude boy using such a term in the first place.

“What the hell is that you brat?!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ngh. F-fine. But this isn’t over...”

“Stand down, you child.”

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

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

“Dame Purson.” Grayfia coolly greeted the woman.

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

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

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

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

“Sekiryuutei?”

“That brat? Him?”

“Is she serious?”

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

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

“What on earth is going on?”

“That bastard killed my brother!”

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

She could almost feel the deep windings of the spell that hid Issei away from the world slowly unwinding. Serafall had told her that the magic was a modified variant of a peculiar old scandinavian curse used to banish the unwanted, or force loners to realize the importance of

interacting with others. It was ironically a spell based on “intimacy”, where increased interactions and connections between the target and others would weaken the effect. The stronger personal relations the target had with an individual, the weaker the effect would be. Likewise, the more isolated the target was, the easier it was to ignore their existence as a whole.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her suddenly rigid body was enough of an answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Don’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Humph. So Tiamat is aware. I suspected as much."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The stage went silent as the implications slowly sunk in.

“... Tch.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What was-?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Riser twitched.

“First it was nee-san. Then it was the shitshow that was Snowball. And now it's the Weeb? This is getting ridiculous. And don't even get me started on how I had to hold your hand so you could *finally* manage to satisfy Bella-nee without giving you extra time to figure out what to do out of pity. I refuse to be the source of a half baked NTR plot because of your incompetence!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Don't tempt me.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Riser supposes one of them would prevent him from using those infuriating phones?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fucking hentai bullshit.

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

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

“As with the bucket.”

“Oh come on!”

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

“Were you thinking about using it?”

“... No?”

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

“Funny how you say that *now*.”

“...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Better than drugging and backstabbing you useless cuck. Or do you want that part of the handicap too?”

“... Get to the point.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Issei smiled.

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

“Myself.”

The room was ominously quiet.

“...”

“...”

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

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

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

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

“Oh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh.

Oh shit.

“That color... you don’t think...”

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

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

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

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

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

This had been planned.

Issei didn't lie. And when he called someone's bluff, he did it with the truth and wielded it like a club against a baby seal.

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

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

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

And it was working.

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

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

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

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

His only hope of a safe way out of this mess, was to win. Even if he lost, he would mitigate the worst of the outcomes. There was no other path available to him that didn't result in absolute disaster.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If it was that much...

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

CRASH!

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

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

“...”

“...”

“... Half an hour recess.” The Maou seamlessly corrected himself, “After which you will be teleported to the premises’ private Rating Game dueling ground. Once the battle commences,

there will be ninety seconds for both sides for non-combat field preparations before you may engage. Are there any questions?”

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

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

“... It can be arranged.”

o. o. o.

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

“We’re using Icarus the moment the fight starts. And I’m following through if it doesn’t work.” Riser didn’t let her finish, his tone cold and final.

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

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

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

Or in wartime.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And with his handicaps, nya?" Ni asked curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, the only major leaders of the factions that he recalled weren't hesitant to touching the Sekiryuutei were Serafall and Gabriel... because usually the first thing he did whenever they

were around back then was essentially tackle hug them so that his head was between their breasts.

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

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

"An empty stock?" Several of the girls aksed.

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

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

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

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

o. o. o.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Although...

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

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

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

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

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

It was finally time to turn things around.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Very well.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rias froze. The one that had assaulted (*raped*) and framed (*claimed to be raped by*) Issei (*Sekiryuutei*).

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was movement on the screen.

“You still have to crown the victor.”

o. o. o.

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

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

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

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

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

Not.

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

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

“Sekiryuutei, are you ready for combat?”

“Zzzzking morons forgot to clean the anal beads againzzzz.” Issei mumbled as his eyes slowly closed and another snot bubble started to inflate. Due to the announcer magic in the arena, everyone was able to hear him clearly despite the distance.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“... Tiamat.”

Pop!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“BOOSTED GEAR!!”

With the Crimson Dragon Emperor's call, Issei’s infamous Sacred Gear revealed itself in its full glory in front of everyone. A blood red gauntlet materialized around his arm, adorned with a massive emerald gem at the back of his hand, with an elaborate pair of crimson and gold lined ridges that wrapped around the entirety of its length in either direction, coiling around his limb

like a pair of snakes. Complete with the golden ridges at his elbow and the ebony black claws that encased his fingers, it made his arm a curious and ominous sight.

Chack chack.

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

“STOCK! EMPTY!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hypocrisy does not suit you.” Riser deadpanned.

“...”

“...”

“... Cuck.”

“Will you stop that!!??”

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

“You haven’t changed in the slightest you reprehensible little mutated lizard! You’re just as immature and childish as ever!!” Had Riser been near Issei, he would have been making a very irritated yakuza-esque expression right in his face while poking him hard in the chest without any hesitation.

“Cuck cuck. B’cuck!”

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

Even if, for some, it was almost nostalgic.

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

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

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

“...”

Ravel all but gasped.

Yuballuna’s breath hitched.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Three.”

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

“Two.”

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

“One.”

Issei yawned widely.

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

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

“Match Start!”

“BOOST! EXPLOSION!”

o. o. o.

Rias watched as the minute and a half pre match session began.

She didn’t say much to the buildup to it. And she didn’t feel like saying much now.

She was too conflicted by what had just happened. By Riser. By her brother. And especially by Issei.

He knew she cared about him. Deeply. Romantically, possibly, but she did care.

And yet, he had yet to say a single word to her since he appeared and literally crashed the party. No. He purposefully made it a point to ignore her.

Not only that, but the conditions of the Game, becoming her pawn? When everyone knew just how much he flat out hated being controlled or manipulated in general?

It hurt. It genuinely hurt her in a way she didn’t expect. And the fact that it was from Issei made it worse.

Riser urged his Peerage forward urgently, as though he was the one against the clock instead of his vastly outnumbered opponent.

Issei on the other hand, simply stood in place and held his hands behind his back as though he was one of those elderly martial artist masters. His literally blank and uninterested stare was so vacant it was hard to tell if he was paying attention to his foes or not.

“Promotion! Bishop!” All eight of Riser’s Pawns shouted at once as they rushed forward as the vanguard and moved to surround Issei in a wide radius as fast as they could. Given that they were all devils, they could cover the hundred meter gap at the speed of an olympic runner’s. They would have been a third of that time had they been promoted to Knight or Queen.

“Bishop?” Sona frowned at the development. The only reason why one would intentionally turn all their pawns into a Bishop instead of the generally more powerful Queen piece is if they had some sort of mass conjunctive spellwork in mind. Meaning Riser had something in mind.

“BOOST! EXPLOSION!!”

A bit before he was fully encircled, Issei’s Sacred Gear discharged itself again.

Sirzechs hummed. "It shouldn't be long now."

"Long until what?" Kiba asked, confused.

"Sensei's gonna do something crazy again. Probably." Gasper sighed heavily, though not taking his eyes off of the screen. Riser and the main force of his Peerage had stopped at the halfway point to Issei and appeared to be starting up some sort of massive spell.

"Probably." Koneko nodded with a dead stare as she watched the pawns lift up their hands and generate a massive barrier around their enemy.

"True, but some context is probably welcome for this." Sirzechs nodded. "Was it ever mentioned that Issei's Sacred Gear was a Subspecies?"

Rias blinked momentarily and dredged through her memories. "I think he mentioned it once or twice, but he never went into detail, which is obvious since he never told anyone what he was."

"Understandable." The Maou hummed, watching and waiting for the shoe to drop. Looking at the timer on the screen...

"BOOST! EXPLOSION!!!"

He smirked at Ddraig's voice echoing through his ears exactly at the twenty second mark. Impressive.

"Does this have to do with his "empty stock" condition that was mentioned earlier?" Sona asked, putting the pieces together quickly.

"Yes actually." On the screen, one of Riser's Pawns, an asian girl with blue hair in odd pigtails wielding a bo staff standing nearly directly behind Issei frowned in confusion. "You see, his Sacred Gear's subspecies' name is called the Endless Crimson Hoard. Despite its rather grandiose name, compared to how diverse other subspecies are, its abilities and alterations are rather meager. Part of its functions are something you've likely already become familiar with. While the Boosted Gear has been known to store items before in its base state, its subspecies version is far more adaptable and seamless in the procedure. Issei's mastery of "whipping it out" and "putting it back" nigh instantly only further exploits this trait. Any physical object that can be stored in a large backpack can easily and effortlessly be stored in his Sacred Gear in an instant."

"Hmmm." Gasper grumbled, having already become very intimate with that particular training.

"BOOST! EXPLOSION!!!" The fourth charge que went off, signaling that thirty seconds had passed.

"Wait." Sona went pale as she realized what Sirzechs was leading up to. "What about *non-physical* objects?"

"Sona-san?" Akeno looked at her confused.

“The Boosted Gear’s limiters.” Sirzechs repeated himself. “Ordinarily, the Boosted Gear has them in place to ensure that the user doesn’t kill themselves by charging more boosts than the host’s bodies can handle, lest they kill themselves. These can sometimes be disabled when Balance Breaker is achieved, but only temporarily. The Endless Crimson Hoard however, disposes of these subfunctions entirely in order to live up to its name. As a result though, the user essentially has no idea and no way to determine what their personal limitations are when amplifying their bodies, all but ensuring their early ends once they enter the first battle that pushes them beyond their established limits.”

Chack Chack! “**EXPLOSION!! BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB!!!**” It was getting harder to differentiate where the start of one boost began and the next. Just trying to calculate the number of rapid fire boosts happening in even a second was enough to cause a nightmare.

“And I assume that one of these limitations is, what, accelerating the cooldown time between boosts?” Kiba swallowed heavily.

“Actually, yes. There is little that this version of the Boosted Gear can’t theoretically amplify, including its cooldown rate. Although, in order to do so, any and all other targets that are boosted will return to their original state, and the cooldown timing will in turn return to normal once he boost’s something else. It’s not so much a limiter as it is, a means for the Sacred Gear’s powers to properly allocate itself.” The Maou nodded, far too casual and laid back given the situation. “From what I’ve been told, Ddraig isn’t particularly fond of this trick. Apparently he gets a headache and dizzy if he does it for too long.”

“**BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB!!!!!!!**”

Yeah, they could easily see that being the case.

“Wait. Accelerating the cooldown time?” Sona’s mind raced frantically, her mathematical skills coming up at the oddest of times.

If the original cooldown rate was ten seconds, and each boost essentially halved that, and each subsequent boost could be considered an exponent to halve that again, and “x” was considered the number of boosts total, then if the cumulative sum of ten over two to the x between one and the number of total boosts made could be considered the amount of time passed in general, then as x reached infinity...

Oh.

Oh.

If Issei boosted at the “zero second mark”, and perfectly boosted at the earliest possible moment after that, then he wouldn’t need ninety seconds to build up a sizeable repository of charges.

In theory, he’d only need *ten* to stock up a literal *infinite* number of charges.

And they had long passed the thirty second mark.

The Endless Crimson Hoard. The pompous name suddenly felt a whole lot more ominous and terrifying to her now.

The empty stock and five minute grace period was just a lure. Riser could have requested a minute or even half and he still would have been successfully duped.

“Haha. It appears young Sona’s got the right idea of what’s happening.” Sirzechs smiled, seeing her sickly pale face. “Rest assured, his timing isn’t that precise. After a certain point he just clusters the boosts and uses them in bursts to accelerate the charge rate to save himself the effort. It’s enough to be concerned, but it’s not that extreme...”

The Maou trailed off as Riser’s pale and outright horrified expression all but filled the screen.

Most believed it was because of the number of Boosts Issei was charging.

Those in the loop though knew it was because Riser was fully aware of what was about to come next.

“Ah. Then again. Maybe it is. We are talking about Issei after all. There’s a reason why he’s survived with this dangerous version of the Boosted Gear for so long.”

o. o. o.

“On my mark!” Riser shouted, not knowing how much time had passed and not caring in the slightest that it was nowhere near ninety seconds yet. Or even a full minute for that matter.

“But-!” Mihae, the only one of the four preparing the spell not fully aware of what was going on, balked at the idea of breaking the firmly established rules.

“If we let him keep going we are as good as dead if we aren’t already!” Her king shouted with far more panic than she had ever heard before. A brief look at Ravel and Yuballuna mirrored his alarm in their eyes. It was more than enough to underscore that they were, for lack of a better term, in deep shit.

The spell they were working on was a colossal undertaking that they had only gotten down as a group two years ago. A massive ordeal that required almost all of her focus to help stabilize alongside Ravel while Yuballuna helped Riser jumpstart the process of getting the physics of the final product working.

When she had first heard of this spell, she had been in awe of Riser for trying to do all this by himself. It was only after pushing from Ravel that they decided to make it a team move to get results.

Speaking of results, it should be noted that the barrier around the Sekiryuutei wasn’t done so to contain the enemy, but rather to contain and focus the damage of the spell they were to unleash on him.

Pure primal power and heat emanated from Riser so severely that the stone tiles underneath him were melting. Had his Peerage not been in tune with his powers and been granted high levels of heat immunity, they would all have at least been severely burned right now instead of the slightly uncomfortable sweating they were doing.

His arms were extended in front of him as four magic circles spun rapidly around him with an additional three at his front. It really was a marvel. Under most circumstances, he'd be astonished he was performing the spell so quickly and seamlessly for once, but his near blind panic had hyper focused his mind to the task at hand or nothing else out of pure self preservation.

“First step!”

Despite their reservations, Yuballuna, Ravel, and Mihae channeled their power to the barrier around Issei, their crimson magic circles infusing themselves on the crystal like magic dome.

Issei merely blinked and lifted an eyebrow.

Chack Chack.

“Second Step!”

Yuballuna and Ravel swapped roles to help Riser maintain and alter the white hot glowing ball of magic at the center of Riser's array of magic circles while Riser himself seemed to condense and further empower the ball even further to unimaginable levels.

“Now!”

“STOCK!!!”

With a laborious heave, Riser's spell was funneled and burst through the circles around him and reappeared inside the dome, refusing at a single point ten meters above Issei.

The Boosted Gear continued to pump itself even as Ddraig's voice was drowned out by the unearthly sound of the disaster already in the making. The heat and power of the incomplete spell was so intense that Issei's body was already indecipherable in the ripples and light above it.

And now the Third Step.

Riser clasped his hands together while new magic circles spun frantically around his arms just as the bright light spun and condensed itself into a marble sized singularity. His strongest spell. A disaster that took him years to finally get the barest holds of.

The birth of a star.

Everything in the dome went white.

o. o. o.

“Hooh?” Sirzechs mused, impressed by Riser’s feat. He may have been assisted in the spellwork, but it appears that his efforts to elevate the young man to Ultimate Class were not mostly unfounded after all. Only slightly.

“Wh-what is *that*?” Gasper shivered. While they knew Riser wasn’t a pushover firsthand, this current display was vastly beyond anything they had witnessed or expected before.

“If my assumption is right, nuclear fission.” The Maou absently replied with the sort of mild curiosity that one would expect from coming across something that had piqued their interest.

“WHAT?!” Sona balked as did others as the audience had to strain from looking at him and the screen. “You mean Riser’s peerage actually just managed to set up a... a...”

“I believe the current popular name for a contained star is a “dyson sphere”. But yes, we are witnessing a crude version of that.” Sirzechs nodded casually. “I must admit, I didn’t expect Riser to complete Icarus in any capacity, much less use it in this way.”

“Icarus?” Kiba frowned, recalling the Greek tale of the man with wax wings before his breath caught itself. “Wait, with a name like that...”

“Yes, it was something he and Issei worked on together when they were still, amicable.” The Maou elaborated. “Originally, the star was intended to be set up at a moderate elevation, and turn the sky into a no fly zone for all creatures except beasts of flame and the strongest exceptions. A Phoenix family ace against the Fallen and Heaven, or anything that flies that isn’t one of them or a Dragon so to speak, but it was left incomplete once things fell apart. I doubt anyone expected Riser to manage to comprehend the intricacies of how a genuine star works by himself, which is why I also doubt anyone expected it here. Much less use it as a close range attack of all things.”

“If nobody expected it then why is nothing happening?!” Gasper shouted, looking around nervously. “Riser broke the rules and attacked barely after the halfway point! Sempai’s literally stuck in the middle of a star! He won’t even have a body left after this!”

Koneko grimaced in agreement. As much as Issei drove them nuts, he didn’t deserve to be killed, much less so thoroughly that his body didn’t even remain.

“No.”

Everyone turned to Rias with their own looks of confusion and panic.

“What do you mean, Rias?” Akeno asked curiously, trying to keep her own unsettled emotions in check.

“I mean the fight isn’t over.” The redheaded girl was the only one that hadn’t turned away from the screen.

Riser had probably attacked early in order to try and force Issei to use one of his restricted abilities, more or less forcing a stalemate since both parties had broken the rules, even if he did

attack first. It was a cheap and petty thing to do, but if Issei really was that dangerous, it probably was the best move he could make given the situation.

But, Issei hadn't been alarmed just before being attacked.

Sirzechs didn't seem alarmed either.

And Grayfia hadn't called the match.

o. o. o.

“Riser Phoenix. You have violated the pre battle rules and have attacked your opponent before allowed.” Grayfia's authoritative words echoed for all ears to hear.

Riser held his breath and swallowed heavily, hoping his gambit worked.

“This is your only warning. Any further infractions will result in your immediate forfeiture.”

It didn't.

“Fuck.”

He didn't even try to hide his feelings on the matter. Anything short of declaring that Issei had broken the rules of the match meant that he was up shit mountain and about to go down shit rapids with a shit avalanche falling on his ass.

The fact that he was allowed a warning at all was simply icing on the shit cake that was being thrown in his face. Had Issei broken any rules, he no doubt would have been disqualified on the spot, but because Riser got one, it not only made it look like the rules were being bent in his favor from the get go, but it would also mean that he would have less room to stand on should he lose in the end. An advantage that he had wasted as far as any third party was concerned.

“Riser-sama?” Siris, alongside the rest of his peerage looked at him confused and slightly worried. There was no way that their opponent should be remotely intact after they dropped a literal localized star on his head.

“He's still alive?!” Isabella, his masked rook, balked in disbelief.

“Icarus failed. Everyone get your spells ready for the backup plan and buy me as much time as possible.” He ordered while trying to keep himself as calm as possible. “Remember the plan. Don't get ahead of yourselves and stay together, and we might still have a hope of winning this. We have enough time to-”

“Since Riser Phoenix has shown intent to proceed ahead of the time limit, and after a word from the Sekiryuutei, it has been decided to prematurely end the pre battle preparation period. All parties prepare for combat.” Grayfia announced.

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!” Riser roared to the sky definitely, losing what little self control he had left.

“No.”

You had to give Grayfia credit for being able to keep her voice completely impassive just as what sounded like the buzzer for a basketball game went off.

Riser cursed again. “Quick! Get the protection spells ready! Knights and Rooks get ready to run interference! And...” His face went pale as he just now remembered where his pawns were. “REGROUP!! ALL PAWNS RETREAT AND REGROUP NOW!!”

“AAAAH!!”

Unfortunately for Riser’s Pawns, Just as he remembered about them, an ominously dark figure blocking out the light of the artificial star appeared on the other side of the barrier right in front of his pawn Marion, as though it was an otherworldly monster from a horror movie.

There was no swell of power. No comment. No spellwork, summons, titanic creature, show of strength, or even flicker of intent.

All the figure did was gently touch the transparent magic wall with the index finger of its left hand.

For the smallest of moments the barrier shone with a renewed prominence that made it seem almost impenetrable.

Marion collapsed. As did the rest of the pawns all at the same time.

An instant later, the magical construct shattered like glass.

“Riser Phoenix. All eight Pawns, retired.”

o. o. o.

“Holy shit.” Koneko balked as did the rest of the audience

“Did... did he just...?” Sona stammered.

“Boost the barrier, specifically the cost to maintain it to the extent that it would drain all of Riser’s Pawns so quickly they went into shock in a single go? Yes.” Sirzechs nodded, as though he had not just witnessed someone wipe out half a peerage with literally just a finger.

“So, that’s how he uses the Boosted Gear then. Instead of empowering himself, he boosts his enemies beyond their limits to instantly overwhelm them. An instant kill move with virtually zero cost or preparation time.” Akeno swallowed heavily, trying not to shiver in fear. Everyone had claimed that he could beat just about anyone just by touching them, but to see it in action was another thing entirely.

“But, how did he survive being stuck in a star of all things?” Gasper asked. “You said it yourself. He would kill himself if he went over his natural limit in boosts.”

“I did. And he still would, if he used the Boosted Gear in the conventional way.” Sirzechs nodded.

“What?” Gasper wasn’t the only one confused by that statement.

“The Boosted Gear, no, even Twice Critical, are remarkable Sacred Gears in a peculiar sense. Being able to boost yourself a single time consists of all sorts of enhancements, rather than a single one. Double strength. Speed. Vitality. Endurance. Magic. Mental acuity. Reaction time. Resistance to the elements. Resistance to curses and diseases. Respiratory, immune, circulatory, digestive, and cognitive system functionality, And all sorts of other minor perks. All in a single go. And yet the only drawback is a matching drain in one’s stamina and a limited time duration...”

Sona froze and reluctantly turned to the Maou. “Are you insinuating that instead of Boosting everything about himself at once in a single go, he’s *micromanaging* what he enhances in order to minimize the stamina drain with the near limitless boosts he has available?”

Sirzechs smiled. “I have only heard of him using the Boosted Gear conventionally less than a handful of times since meeting him, and nearly all of them were to move heavy equipment and do chores around the house a bit faster because he was feeling particularly lazy. That said, tell me, how much stamina do you think it would cost to only raise one’s natural fire resistance to say, safely walk on the surface of the sun?”

o. o. o.

A hundred boosts to his body’s natural physical structural endurance to endure the sudden pressure and gravitational distortions around him..

Another hundred to his body’s natural physical elasticity so that he’d be able to move with said endurance and not turn into a statue or turn his heart into a literal rock.

A hundred for his body’s natural magic resistance, just in case there was something slipped into the spell.

A hundred boosts to his natural fire tolerance. And that again for his natural fire resistance. It had to be both since merely raising one’s fire resistance alone for too long would lead to organ damage from the body’s sudden inability to discharge and regulate its internal body temperature. Twenty would probably be enough with his constitution but it never hurts to be safe.

And repeat all that again for his clothes, so he wouldn’t be naked for once.

He lost count of how many times he forgot that last part.

... Oh, and twenty boosts to take out Bird Person's Pawns with their own spell. Probably could have done it with ten, but after Kuro he wasn't going to underestimate the power of a cat girl ever again.

"What do we got in the tank, Ddraig?"

"Eight hundred million and some change."

"Wasn't our personal best for a minute around twelve Trillion?"

"We're still out of practice and were cut short of a full minute by eleven seconds, but it's more than enough for the Phoenix. This isn't a trick we used often in your prime regardless, seeing as you normally had around seventeen figure stock on you on a good day. You ludacris psychopath."

"Fair enough." He would sigh at the minor light hearted jab, but breathing was still a bit of a minor issue being so close to the mini star behind him. Fortunately half a decade of near perpetual deep breathing exercises helped with his ability to hold his breath for a while.

Just for good measure though he brushed off some burnt ash from his shoulders. He didn't need to, but fuck it, he just tanked a star. Might as well.

(Play music: Korn: Twisted Transistor)

"Let's get this over with." He mentally huffed, with a sun at his back melting everything around him and took a step forward on the molten floor as though he was the real monster from hell in this exchange.

The Boosted Gear's coiled design coiled up, then discharged.

"EXPLOSION!"

Nervous system electrical conductivity.

"EXPLOSION!"

Neuron impulse transfer efficiency of gap junctions in all synapses.

"EXPLOSION!"

Mental acuity.

"EXPLOSION!"

Ocular perception.

"EXPLOSION!"

Temporal perception.

“EXPLOSION!”

Maximize hemoglobin to red blood cell ratio for oxygen and nutrient capacity efficiency.

“EXPLOSION!”

Minor acceleration to glycolysis for easier energy.

“EXPLOSION! EXPLOSION! EXPLOSION! EXPLOSION”

Cardiovascular efficiency. Respiratory efficiency. Circulatory efficiency. Lactic acid decomposition acceleration.

Each passing instant enabled Issei to further enhance his body in all the ways that mattered to him. There was no swell of power, physical change, or anything that would indicate that he was any more dangerous than before. There were surprisingly fewer hard limits on what could be enhanced in the human body without repercussion once the internal temperature tolerance issue was addressed.

All the while, his eyes never left the only one that mattered. He didn't miss the fact that Bird Person and a few others in his group were casting spells like crazy. He could hazard a few guesses as to what some of them were.

He didn't even blink when he was suddenly surrounded by Riser's Knights and Rooks with their weapons and fists all aimed at him.

(Hey you. Hey you. Devil's little sister.

Listening to your, Twisted Transistor.)

He didn't bother with any quips, and they didn't offer him any ultimatum. They just immediately went for the kill from four sides.

(Hold it between your legs, turn it up turn it up,)

And yet he didn't pay them any mind and kept walking, placing his foot down just as they were on top of him, his sacred gear once more recoiling.

(Low end is coming through, can't get enough.)

He vanished the instant the ground he was on was impaled, crushed and destroyed by the collaboration. Instead, he was just a few meters ahead of where he had been before as though nothing peculiar had happened, completely ignoring the four young women.

(A lonely life. Where no one understands you.

But don't, give up because the Music do.)

It was almost comical. All four young women chased after Issei with frantic speed, rushing with fists and weapons ablaze, sometimes literally.

Over and over they fell upon him determined to make that moment his last.

Over and over he vanished just before they made contact, reappearing just a short distance away as though nothing happened with complete disinterest in his eyes.

(Music do.)

Karlamine swiped at him from the side with her blazing sword.

(Music do.)

Xuelan dropped down on him above with a knee that would have turned a normal human body into paste, her legs covered in blazing flames.

(Music do.)

Isabela tried to blitz him from behind, her fists burning viciously.

(Music do.)

Siris used her Knight speed to teleport to his front and tried to bisect him.

(Music do.)

Xuelan and Isabela tried a pincer attack from his sides.

(Music do.)

All four of them jumped to his front and tried to rush him.

Each and every violent attempt to fight, interrupt, or even slow down Issei was completely ineffective as he effortlessly warped a short distance away each and every time without breaking stride, leaving only the flames and craters of his uninterrupted enemy's rapid fire attacks behind where he once was. Although, this last jump warped him further than before.

Right in front of the barrier in front of Riser and his magic casters. All unnerved, understandably.

Issei reached out and touched the construct.

(Because the music do. And then it's reaching)

“EXPLOSION!”

The barrier shattered. Or at least, the first layer of it.

“Hmmm.” The coil of his Sacred Gear cocked again.

“EXPLOSION! EXPLOSION! EXPLOSION!”

Three rapid fire boosts. Three more layers gone, but clearly many more remained.

To the defenders credit, they didn't flinch under the assault. Granted, they were all casting spells like crazy, but they weren't falling under the pressure. Yet.

(Inside you. Forever preaching.)

He should have expected as much. Bird Person was part of the old group after all. There was no way he'd forget the simple trick to deal with his usual ways of taking people out quickly. The paper thin barriers got in the way of his alternative white magic one shot moves too.

In fact...

He took a step to the side and vanished just as Karlamine tried to swipe at his back with a blazing sword.

A “step” back repositioned him to get a better view of the four girls assaulting him.

A “step” at a diagonal angle put him right at the punk Phantom of the Opera reject.

His hand already reached out and groping her chest.

(Fuck you too. Your scream's a whisper.)

“Wha-?” She balked in genuine surprise and terror, not at all worried about her decency at that moment.

“EXPLOSION! EXPLOSION!”

Two thin barriers that protected the Rook shattered under the sudden assault.

This time, Issei did sigh even as he stepped back and warped twenty meters away to avoid getting decked by the woman he just molested.

Looks like he was going to do things the painful way after all. He could probably blast away their protections one at a time eventually, odds were that his attackers only had at most ten of the thin layers each, but it would take forever. Had he been allowed to use his fire, he could have blasted through these minor protections instantly. He could simply brute force his way through the barriers by enhancing his body further with Ki and white magic, but there were plenty of ways that could backfire if he wasn't careful.

Oh well. He tried. Brutal way it was then.

“How dare you! Only Riser-sama can touch us like that!” The Chun Li cosplayer charged in with a strong kick that she should have known wouldn't land by now.

It was at that point that Issei finally moved his bandaged right arm, which he had just been lazily moving at his side until then.

“Pocket sand.”

And threw the bunch of ground up gravel and half solidified magma from the abused ground he had been carrying all this time into her face.

“Kyaaa!?” She blocked her eyes and took a step back, clearly not expecting the cheap tactic...

Just as Issei had gently pushed her chest with his left hand.

“EXPLOSION!!”

(Hang on you, Twisted Transistor.)

There was no scream or shout of surprise as the Rook vanished backwards with a loud supersonic BOOM.

The only way to track her path was through the decorative stone obelisks in the background that all but exploded at the base as she was run straight through four of them before seemingly stopping at the fifth at what looked like nearly half a kilometer away.

“Riser Phoenix Rook, retired.”

Isabella, Kalawarner, and Siris froze in surprise at the way their comrade was so easily dispatched.

They began to shiver as they realized that Issei was looking at them for once.

(Hey you. Hey you. Finally you get it.)

Issei moved one of feet slightly to the side, and vanished.

He reappeared behind Karlamine two instants later, much to her absolute horror, which was understandable. The idea for anyone or anything to get the drop on a Knight on its full guard was ludicrous to imagine under most circumstances.

(The world ain't fair. It'll eat you if you let it.)

“Karlamine!” Siris shouted, coming in swinging with her own massive sword at her own high speeds.

The surprised Knight moved as quickly as possible, swiping behind herself with her blazing sword.

Issei on the other hand didn't move from his spot as the flames flowed over his body since Karlamine's blade was more to prevent him from getting closer to her retreat than an actual

attack. Given the fact he just tanked an artificial star, the sword's flaming discharge did little more than splash over him like water.

That however didn't stop Siris from closing in on his position with a horizontal swipe to cut him in half.

Right in arm's reach of him no less.

(And as your tears fall on, your breasts, your dress.)

He ducked under the wild attack, lifting his left hand up to gently graze the bottom of the blade as it passed overhead.

The thing about those paper thin barriers was that they usually didn't last long around implements of brute force like, say, giant two handed swords.

“EXPLOSION!”

“Wha-?”

The one thousand and twenty four times heavier blade flew out of the Knight's surprised hands, unable to maintain a hold of the immense inertia it now possessed and threw her off, causing her to stumble.

Right over Issei's outstretched leg.

“EXPLOSION!”

The Knight faceplanted into the ground so fast and hard that the stone tiles cracked. At the same time her overweight sword fell to the ground nearby with a heavy clang that everyone ignored.

“Siris!” Isabella rushed in to try and help her friend, dodging around the errantly flying sword in the process.

(Vibrations coming through. You're in a mess.)

Issei seamlessly stood up and took a lazy unmodified step around the stunned Knight with his other leg reared back, effortlessly punting her into her teammate a second later.

“EXPLOSION!!”

Warping both of them right into the artificial star behind them, through it and another three subsequent spires in the background, hitting the top of the last one so hard that it literally snapped off with the pair embedded in it right before they vanished in magical light halfway during their fall back to the ground.

“Riser Phoenix. Knight and Rook Retired.”

(A lonely life. Where no one understands you.)

Karlamine shivered as she lifted her swords up into a defensive stance.

Unfortunately before she could regain her composure, Issei had already taken a step forward and appeared less than half a foot right in front of her face, his face still as bored and expressionless as it had been since the fight had started.

That horrifyingly dead stare that seemed to tell her very soul that he did not regard her as an opponent, target, or even a living being, but a mere tiring “thing” that he had to deal with and instantly forget once addressed.

Not even the most conceited and obnoxious members of nobility had ever made her feel so small and insignificant before so effortlessly.

“Gyaaa!” She shouted in alarm and retreated as fast as she could. She reasoned with herself that even without fighting, so long as Issei focused on her and not Riser, she could still do her jo-

Again her thoughts were cut short as Issei seemingly teleported in her path without any warning.

She knew what to look for. Riser had told her how he magnifies the distance he travels of each step he takes with his Boosted Gear to borderline teleport at will, but it was one thing to hear about it and another to deal with it first hand.

Timing a move based on a person’s step wasn’t too difficult, but when they decided which step would be the one that warps them, how far it would take them, could rapid fire the damn things, and moved in off angles at times, it became near impossible to keep track of where and how he’d move next.

Most teleport spammers had limits when it came to such a jarring method of moving. Either magical, physical, or cognitive. They couldn’t keep it up forever. But apparently the Sekiryuutei used some medical trick on his head to keep his mind and senses straight for hours on end if her King was to be believed.

A rapid fire, near certain-kill move. Instantaneous movement with next to no restrictions in terms of usage or range that can put him in and out of anyone’s guard at will. Versatile self amplification. And that was without all his other supposed tricks and gimmicks.

Each step was calculated. Each jump of distance was calculated. Every damn move was refined with enough precision to stop at nearest half a meter to efficiently, effortlessly, and repeatedly cut off a Knight moving at *full fucking tilt*.

It wasn’t simply a matter of having a unique skillset. This boy, no, this *monster* functioned in a completely different way than any conventional mortal or supernatural being in a nightmarish way.

No wonder Riser claimed that it was nigh suicide to fight the Sekiryuutei in a one on one battle.

(But don’t give up. Because the music do.)

She tried to escape, running as quickly as her Knight enhanced speed would allow. She was the fastest member of Riser's Peerage, so she should have managed as much.

(Music do.)

She tried attacking him with fire to distract him for more space.

(Music do.)

She tried to blind him with a fire based flashbang spell she learned from Yuballuna.

(Music do.)

She tried to enshroud herself in flames to keep him away.

(Music do.)

She tried to use an experimental spell that used her flames to enhance her speed to turn her into a borderline runaway comet.

(Music do.)

She tried to fly away, only for that route to be cut off as he once more nearly instantly appeared in her path, standing on a simple and common artificial magic platform spell.

(Music do.)

She was panicking so much that she didn't even manage to react in time as the borderline dope chopped her head as if he was doing a gag.

“EXPLOSION!!”

BOOM!

The poor knight crashed back into the ground head first hard, making a small crater.

But surprisingly she wasn't knocked out from it, as her coughing and staggered body picked itself up from the small crater a few seconds later.

However, she had not recovered enough to get away from Issei, who had appeared once more right in front of her before the dust had even settled.

“For what it's worth, I am sorry to embarrass you like this.” He spoke for the first time since the fight began. “You just got bad luck to be put in the way.”

(Because the music do, and then it's reaching.)

And then shoved her backwards.

Right in the direction of Riser's barrier.

“EXPLOSION!”

Crash!!

“KYAAA?!”

The dozens of magic barriers protecting Riser and his group shattered instantly as Karlamine not only blitzed backwards through the defenses, but crashed straight into Riser's Bishop Mihae in the process, taking her out of sight as well before plowing through two of the decorative stone spires in the background.

(Inside you. Forever preaching.)

“Riser Phoenix Knight and Bishop. Retired.”

Fortunately, it appears that they only focused on providing themselves magical defense and forgot to amplify their physical protections.

A slew of bright lights spawned all over the area.

Unfortunately, they had not been solely focusing on defense if the countless bright explosive charges Yuballuna had conjured all over the battlefield was any indication.

His location was no exception if the baseball sized magic explosive two feet from his skull growing brighter by the millisecond was any indication. As were the dozens of other charges all around him. Odds were that the inside of the barrier was filled with mass produced pre primed charges that were sent loose in every direction the moment the defenses eventually did break.

Chack chack.

The Boosted Gear cocked itself.

... Not bad.

(Fuck you too. Your scream's a whisper.)

BOOOM!!

The cluster of scattered irregular explosives went off in a massive chain reaction all over Riser's location, where he, Yuballuna, and Ravel were all protected by a last second new barrier placed around themselves.

(Hang on you, Twisted Transistor.)

Nearly fifty meters away from them, Issei reappeared with a slightly heavy sigh and his clothes slightly ruffled, but otherwise unmarred.

Save for a slight cut on his cheek.

“You’ve gotten sloppy.” Ddraig chided.

“They slipped in cutting curses into the explosives. Borderline magical shrapnel. Conventional spell bombs aren’t that elaborate. Much less mass produced ones.” Issei carelessly excused himself while noting the increasing number of bombs in front of him that were spawning by the second. His body was enforced for concussive and heat based attacks, but he could still be cut. Properly boosting himself to not be cut by actual sword users was an utter pain due to the toughness getting in the way of conventional muscle movements (It would be easier to pull off if he had more muscle mass but he preferred to be on the slimmer side), so he normally just avoided those whenever possible.

Something that Riser, Ravel and Yuballuna still apparently remembered about him even after all this time.

He was almost touched by it.

“They’ve gotten better.” He admitted with a borderline nostalgic tone as he knelt down and grabbed at the stone tiles under him, using the most basic of earth magic to convert the stone into tiny pellets in his hand.

At the same time, his cut glowed slightly white before vanishing as though it wasn’t even there.

“But that’s all. Only just a bit.” Ddraig played along, allowing to agree with his partner’s perspective on the matter.

“Yeah.” Issei stood up and began lazily tossing the pebbles up and down in his hand. *“Only just a bit.”*

The Boosted Gear cocked itself once again.

“Pity. This could have been interesting.”

And then Issei stepped forward while whipping out the stone holding hand.

(Hey you hey you. This won’t hurt a bit.)

The thin magic energy coated rocks spread out like a shotgun blast with the aid of the boosted gear, hitting a wide range of the floating bomb charges and making them explode spectacularly.

But Issei had already relocated to another angle of the magical floating minefield with another handful of debris and his arm cocked back before even a third of the explosions had gone off.

(This won’t hurt a bit, this won’t hurt.)

Another angle. Another handful of common stones. Another chain of bombs. The process seemed to repeat with every heartbeat of those watching. It was to the point that it felt like he

was attacking from all angles at once, and the explosions were his own spells instead of Yuballuna's.

Within seconds, Riser, Ravel and Yuballuna's silhouettes were already visible in the madness.

No. Just Ravel's and Yuballuna's.

(Says who? Says who? Anesthetize this bitch.)

Both the women looked around frantically, both on guard while still casting magic and reestablishing the barest minimum shields to protect themselves. While they still had a role to play, with all the explosions going on it was impossible to tell where Issei was or where he could come from.

“Where is-?”

CRASH!!

Yuballuna couldn't even scream as Issei literally warp-drop-kicked her from the sky into her side straight through the fresh paper thin barriers that they had set up. His attack was so sudden that the poor woman couldn't even express her surprise before she was forced to the earth and skid across it while Issei rode her body like a surfboard through the remaining bombs going off around them like a Michael Bay movie.

(Anesthetize this bitch, anesthetize.)

At least, until the Queen herself started to glow with a familiar light.

“... That's...”

BOOM!

And she too exploded.

High in the sky, Yuballuna and Ravel breathed out heavily while hidden behind a cloaking spell. Maintaining so many attacks and illusions remotely was an exhausting endeavor.

“You think we actually got him with that?” Ravel asked with trepidation.

“Even if we did, I doubt it did much. Clones are too complicated to slip in custom extra features into their explosions.” Yuballuna swallowed while sweating heavily. They couldn't keep this up for much longer.

“There's always room for improvement.” A third voice stated bluntly behind them.

Both devils shouted in alarm and flew away while blasting the newcomer with as much fire and magic as they could muster.

(Just let me be, between you and me don't fit.)

“Question.” Issei continued casually while standing on a magic platform to their right, nowhere near where he had been, which was currently on fire. “First Icarus, and then the bomb clones. Should I be touched that you managed to finish those old projects of ours without me, or pissed that you thought it was a good idea to use them on me?”

Both women swallowed heavily and resisted the urge to look at one another for advice. To be fair, his inquiry was a reasonable one given their history.

“I...” Ravel spoke out, trying to come up with an answer on the spot...

But was cut off when Issei appeared between the two of them and gently tapped them on the shoulders with each hand, as if bidding them farewell.

“No. Don’t bother. It’ll probably be just another empty answer that doesn’t mean anything.”

Before either Devil could react to words that speared them through their chests, Issei had cut off the magic to the platform he was on and dropped to the ground below.

“What was-?! Ravel! Your shoulder!” Yuballuna shouted as she spotted the glowing red and black magic circle where Issei had touched her.

“I?! You too!” Ravel spotted the matching array instantly, and recognized its patterns the following moment. “Wait, that’s?!”

Below them, Issei held up his right hand and snapped his fingers.

(Because the music do.)

“Dress Break.”

The original spell got rid of the target’s clothes and any artificial fabrics on their person.

Sufficiently overcharged, it also acted as an extreme exfoliation based spell that aggressively cleansed the target’s body and dead skin cells.

Overcharge it to the extreme though...

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!”

(And then it’s reaching.)

Ravel and Yuballuna screamed at the top of their lungs as their barriers shattered, their clothes were torn apart in mid air, and their bodies went rigid as though they were being electrocuted.

... And not only were the target’s somatosensory nerves, which is responsible for one’s sense of touch, would be overstimulated to the extreme to the point of blacking out, but they’d be stripped of all non-natural defenses as well. The concept of the naked frame of the target would be realized in its fullest capacity, stripping them of all forms of equipment and defenses, magical, barrier, and otherwise that they were not naturally born with.

The pudendal nervous system, which was the subsection located in one's hips and genital region, was no exception to this overwhelming assault.

Whether it was pleasurable or not, he had found it varied depending on the personal tastes of the target.

That said, human or devil, when all of the nerves of one's body are assaulted so viciously at once, there is really only one outcome.

Total shut down.

(Inside you, forever preaching,)

Unconscious, naked, humiliated, and notably leaking between their legs, Yuballuna and Ravel fell down defeated to the ground in full view of dozens of Devil aristocrats before they vanished in magical light.

“Riser Phoenix Queen. Retired.”

Issei paused at the lack of bishop in the statement, just before Ravel's body crashed into the ground next to him.

A quick glance told him all he needed to know, with a fading white light fading around her twitching body.

... It looks like she had taken his advice to be a healer all those years ago after all. To last this much longer than Bella-nee after getting hit by a maxed out Dress Break despite the power difference was notable.

(Fuck you too. Your scream's a whisper.)

“I-Issei...” She managed to gasp out despite having little to no control over her muscles, paying no heed to the fact that she was completely naked.

He didn't bother replying though, or acknowledge her pathetic state. He just walked forward, pretending she didn't exist, like she did him back then.

The silence was damning.

And moments later...

“Riser Phoenix Bishop. Retired.”

He didn't look back. He was already focused on the final target in this annoying chore.

Thankfully he was still competent enough in magic to shield his eyes. Imitation or not, looking directly at a star was usually a terrible idea.

“How much longer are you going to hide in there?”

The titanic ball of plasma twitched and warped, clearly not as a result of “containing” something irregular, but more a matter of “being” irregular itself.

Soon enough, the ball contorted and morphed itself, no longer simply an orb of pure plasma and power, but a titanic bird of crimson, gold and yellow flame. Wings spanning twenty meters in either direction set the entire battleground alight just by moving. The heat emanating from it melting the nearby pillars that had not been already destroyed in the earlier fighting.

(Hang on you, Twisted transistor.)

“KAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Issei was impressed to the point of lifting an eyebrow.

“What do you think? I’m feeling some non-biblical power mixed in that I’m unfamiliar with. I wanna say Middle Eastern origin?”

“The Egyptian Sun God, Ra.” Ddraig casually noted as Riser’s new form continued to tower over them. **“A minor blessing containing the conceptual essence of the sun, but it synergizes well with his genetics and nature. Likely he siphoned the essence of some artifact he found rather than obtained a direct blessing, which gave him the push to use “sun” based magic. The Egyptian mythos have been almost as isolationist as the vampires for the past few centuries. Either way, it’s not often that a Devil is willing to, let alone manages to harness the power of another pantheon.”**

A juiced up fire elemental with some divinity, the properties of a small star, and most likely disgustingly enhanced regenerative properties.

He had to give credit where credit was due. Without a hard conceptual or elemental counter, Riser could probably curbstomp a good number of the heavy hitters in the world like this, pending on how long he could last of course.

“Hmm. And the odds someone’s gonna be pissed once word gets out?”

“A coin toss. Though I would not be surprised if he suffers from poor luck in the future. Curses are rather popular in that region.”

“So long as they don’t blame me for it this time.” The teen mentally sighed as the fifteen meter tall monster composed literally of plasma, magic, and perpetually combusting atmosphere bore down on him and opened its beak.

A whole fourth of the entire battlegrounds was instantly set ablaze with a white hot flash.

“Not bad. I actually felt that one.” Ddraig hummed curiously as Issei appeared to the monster’s left a good fifty meters away. Dregs of steam and smoke leaked from his body, indicating that he had not managed to get out of the attack completely unaffected.

“The essence of the “sun” and its “light” are being harnessed and concentrated. Probably.” Issei didn’t seem too bothered by his slightly ruffled state though. *“Meaning his fire hits faster and stronger than it normally would. No, it can’t really be considered fire at this point. Fire’s just the aftereffect.”*

The monster flapped its left wing, and everything to that side was blown away and ignited.

“Hm. That sounds about right I suppose.” Ddraig mused as they appeared once again this time from the back. They glanced momentarily where they had once been to note the cracked and weathered state of the stone tiles. **“That there doesn’t look like mere light and fire related damage though.”**

“A conceptual curse of erosion and dehydration stemming from the sun and desert. Or something along those lines.” Issei agreed, noting the lingering magical energy in the afflicted earth. *“It’s sticking something fierce to where it hits too. It’ll probably drain anything that gets close. He knows I’m not particularly quick when it comes to getting rid of curses. Not without my Presence. That bit might actually be a problem.”*

“If you get caught.”

“If.” Issei’s legs bounced slightly so he could hop ever so slightly, and he vanished just before his location was flooded with golden yellow flames.

He reappeared nearly two hundred meters in the air, standing on a small magical platform.

If the battle had been in an enclosed area, he might be in trouble. But in a wide open space like this, the number of places Issei could literally walk to safely and easily was limitless.

The bird cawed angrily, shaking the air around it with just pure volume, and flapped its wings to take flight, simultaneously firing off hundreds of human sized fireballs at Issei in the process.

None of them hit, as Issei had merely taken a step to the side and boosted himself out of range of the widespread attack instantly.

“Hmmm.” He looked down at the flying bird, who only needed a few moments to find him again and readjust himself.

The meeting of their eyes was all Issei needed to determine that Riser was still very much fully conscious and in control of his actions.

Which was good because Issei had to “step” out of the way a moment later to avoid a literal plasma laser breath attack.

“Partner?” Ddraig knew when something was on Issei’s mind.

“I’m tired. I’m finishing this joke of a show.” The ground was cursed, and while Riser tried to hide it, the fireballs he shot up from earlier were still going strong way high up in the sky and no longer moving. Odds were they were part of some elaborate trap or scheme for later.

A later that would never come.

The titanic bird opened its mouth to attack again, just as Issei leaned forward.

Another lance of pure destructive heat was fired off that seemed to warp and tear through the false night sky.

And Issei appeared right on the Phoenix's beak with his left hand resting between its surprised eyes. Only the thin protective white magical covering around the teen shielded him from the withering curse of the desert that Riser had surrounded him with as a trap. He needed no further protection for the heat.

Speaking of which...

Issei's right foot pulsed with Ki as he stomped down, shattering the dozen paper thin heat shields around Riser's head that provided the final barriers between the two. It had been too risky to do it earlier with the others in case there was a trap, but now...

"Your max before was around fifty boosts." There was no sense of nostalgia or emotion at all in the human teen's eyes as it bore down on the vastly larger flaming beast's terrified ones.

Chack Chack.

"Let's see if you can take five hundred."

"EXPLOSION!!"

The blinding eruption that ensued devastated the battlegrounds, flooding it with light and heat. The artificial dimension containing it nearly collapsed on itself from the stress. Not a single facet or portion of the false world was observable in the chaotic and unexpected detonation that few if any in the world could adequately prepare themselves for and remain in one piece.

It was so vicious that not even the magics used to monitor the lives and conditions of the participants was inoperable for nearly a full minute while the rampant distortions and fires devastated the already abused world.

Until...

"Riser Phoenix. Retired."

o. o. o.

