Chapter 23: Admit it, you want someone to do something like this in our modern politics if only to finally get shit done

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Seven years ago:

If his day to day life wasn’t already arduous enough, and he didn’t perpetually suspect that at least some of his inner circle of co-conspirators enjoyed making his life as obnoxious as possible, Riser would have broken down in tears by now.

“Whoa, this place is really nice.” Issei looked around the mountainous park that was considered half a nature wildlife preserve in Hell and half a high intensity training ground… because of the aforementioned nature wildlife.

It’s the underworld. “Exotic” is borderline synonymous with “extremely lethal” here. Those that didn’t get that were few in number and did a wonderful job of self-managing said numbers without outside assistance.

That said, the young human boy was right in a sense. The park was more scenic than Tiamat’s familiar forest, with large mountains that jut out of the earth like spires, floating islands that somehow possessed lakes of never ending capacity seeing as their waterfalls never stopped, and flora and fauna of endless colors and vibrancy.

“A backset like this would make a beautiful outdoor sex setting.”

And of course, the boy had to ruin it.

“Why are you following Riser to his bi annual intensive training session again?” The Phoenix asked, not even bothering to hide his annoyance. “Don’t you have a small population of women to molest and or harass? And double that number of random projects that are liable to get us all arrested by association?”

“First of all Bird Person, it’s not “a small population” of women. It’s “all” the women. Get your facts right.” Issei corrected with a huff, somehow taking himself completely seriously.

“Of course.” Riser on the other hand, didn’t.

“Second, I am taking this trip seriously. Physical training is important.”

Riser rolled his eyes. “For the ha-”

“For *The Harem*.” The boy cut him off harshly. “Remember the capitals in your voice. I can tell when you forget them.”

*“He really can. It’s kinda creepy. I mean, I can tell too, but I’m blind and naturally run on bullshit logic, so I got a pass in that regard.”* Ghost chuckled, amused as always.

“Riser thought that you were in charge of this idiot’s physical training. What is the point of this additional harassment?” Riser changed his attention to the slightly more sane fool in the Sacred Gear.

*“I am, but there’s always minor kinks and adjustments that need to be tended to in person by a pro on the outside if you want a truly optimized body. Can’t cover that in here. My other brothers could if they were in my place because of their skillsets, but I’m not exactly a micromanaging ass or a body horror slash builder type like they are. Just an ass that has a ton of practical experience in that regard.”* The immortal casually explained his shortcomings. *“So when we heard from your adorable little sister that you were about to go out for training and your fellow meatsack student was a proficient training junkie…”*

“Zechs and Gray-chan decided to help me stalk you.” Issei concluded shamelessly.

*“Plus Jas said something about you skipping Issei-sitting duty and needing to make up for it while she had a girl’s weekend with the others.”* Ghost added. *“Speaking as a man that’s been married and had kids before, you don’t mess with a girl’s weekend unless someone’s actually dying. Otherwise, someone’s going to be dying. Painfully and slowly. Alone. On The Couch.”*

“Noted.” Riser deadpanned, his tone didn’t change in the slightest, however he still did make sure to internalize Ghost’s eccentric advice. Only a fool dismissed words of wisdom borne from firsthand experience. “Riser will make it a point to speak to Ravel about needlessly divulging personal plans in the future.”

“Hey, don’t be mean to Canary.”

“She’s younger than you are, fool. She’s not a part of your harem.”

“Yet.”

“*Ever.”* Riser held his ground. He’d rather join Heaven than ever be legitimate family with this perpetual disaster event horizon.

“And they say *I* have trouble dealing with reality.” The boy snorted before looking around. “So where’s this training buddy of yours? Is he as much of a fluffer as you are?”

Before the Devil could demonstrate to Issei what he thought about being called a fluffer with gratuitous amounts of fire, a commotion deeper on the forest caught their attention.

BOOM!

Several loud explosions and impacts were heard and felt a short distance away, shaking the trees and ground beneath their feet. Nearby, several animals and beasts the size of trucks and cars ran past, completely ignoring the pair.

“Whatever it is, it’s not my fault this time. I think.” Issei immediately went on the defensive, which was admittedly a natural reaction for him whenever things exploded nearby and he wasn’t supposedly involved.

“Given your track record for agitating the local wildlife wherever you go, Riser is not convinced.” That was a lie. Riser could instantly tell who and what was responsible for the increasingly loud and devastating explosions, but he wouldn’t let Issei off the hook that easily.

BOOM!

“I’m serious! I don’t think it’s my fault this time!” The boy pouted, but not taking his eyes off of the direction the sounds were coming from. “And I think it’s coming to us specifically!”

BOOM!!

This time, a large mass of something flew out from whatever detonated nearby and soared at least a hundred meters in the sky before falling back to the ground like a missile and crashed right in front of them.

“The fuck?!” Issei grimaced as he shielded his face.

“Your entrance is still as crass and sloppy as always.” Riser on the other hand, chided the newcomer as a second more human shaped body leapt from the forest and landed on the mound of twitching flesh and bone in front of them. “Which, in retrospect, is still vastly more elegant and palatable than anything the one next to Riser can muster.”

“You do know your vocabulary becomes more obnoxious and obvious whenever you are trying to impress someone, right?” The boy deadpanned. “There is such a thing as trying too hard. Most women see it as a turnoff. You might want to work on that.”

“Hahahaha!” In contrast to Riser’s steadily growing ire, the newcomer found their interactions more than amusing. “So this is the human kid everyone’s been talking about recently? The one that’s been driving you mad, Riser? He’s a funny little guy! I like him!”

Standing tall with an intimidating and muscular physique, Sairaorg Bael grinned widely as he looked down at the pair.

“Sairaorg. Riser assures you, he will correct that mistake soon enough.” Riser sighed.

“… Hey is it me or does he look like a knockoff character from Saint Saiya with that hair style?” Issei, true to form, said the first thing that came to his mind.

*“It’s the unnecessarily overgrown sideburns. They were a thing in the eighties. I never understood them myself. Honestly, some idiots overdo it so much that they look like they have a sagging hairy scrotum with testicle draped over each ear.”* Ghost chipped in.

“Whoa, they really do look like scrotums.” Issei blinked owlishly as he tilted his head to the side.

“… What?” Sairaorg blinked, completely at a loss for words.

“Riser rests his case.” Raiser shrugged, but didn’t hide his amused grin. It wasn’t often that meathead was taken down a peg or two for something not political related.

*“You have only yourself to blame for picking a hair style that originated from the nineteen eighties. Nothing good ever comes from that decade.”* Ghost said with more than a bit of pity.

“… Pffftahahahaha!” In contrast to how most individuals would react, let alone a member of Devil aristocracy, Sairaorg found his first encounter with Issei absolutely hilarious. “Aha! This kid is hilarious, and I am completely lost! Do you mind if we try this again?”

“Sure thing Scrotum Hair!”

*“Too much. Re-roll on the name.”* Ghost chided. It was something that happened every now and then whenever Issei picked out a nickname that went past the line of acceptability.

“Sure thing Sai!” The boy recovered without missing a beat.

“Wait what?” Riser did a doubletake, and while he would never admit it, with a hint of hurt in his voice. “Why does he get addressed with a passable name?”

“Because you’re Bird Person.” The boy blinked in confusion.

“That’s not what Riser meant and you know it!” Why was it so hard to get a straight answer from this child? It was like pulling teeth!

“Hahahaha! You two look like you get along great! I’m happy you’ve made such an interesting friend Riser!” With a heavy thump, Sairaorg jumped down from the corpse of his prey and landed right in front of the pair.

“Do not make Riser burn you to ash Bael. There are no witnesses to expose the deed.” Riser took offense to that.

“I’m right here you know.” Issei pouted. Had this been an anime, the screen would be angled such that only the bare top of the boy’s head would be seen at the bottom of the screen.

“No witnesses that anyone will believe or take seriously.” Riser corrected himself without altering his glare at the laughing third party.

“Oh. Okay yeah that makes sense.” At the very least, Issei was self-aware about how people saw him most of the time.

“Hahahaha!”

“Stop laughing when Riser is threatening your life!” Riser roared bursting into fire, convincing neither one of them.

“You must be pretty strong. Bird Person doesn’t actually intend to carry through with his threats unless he really thinks he can get away with it without repercussions or is confident it’ll just hurt us a little.” Issei looked at Sairaorg, completely unaffected by the spike in temperature.

*Bird Person.*

*Bird Person.*

*Bird Person.*

The name echoed within Riser’s head like an insufferable gong. Every iteration drove him further into the building inferno that was his rage and indignation.

Not that anyone noticed.

“Haha! Well, I don’t like to brag, but our friend here hasn’t managed to beat me yet.” Sairaorg grinned and puffed his chest out, flexing his muscles underneath his skin tight black tank top. “Although I will admit he has been proving more challenging as of late.”

“Hooooh. You’re really are ripped. And not in a steroid junkie way either. All your muscles are properly conditioned and shaped for optimal performance and endurance.” Issei, completely ignoring the increasingly infuriated Riser, began poking Sairaorg’s body in seemingly random places as though to inspect it. “So this is what a properly decked out body looks like. No wonder women prefer this over the borderline pedophile skinny bishounen look that younger girls prefer. You must get laid all the time.”

*“Oi, I told you, I can’t help my featherweight situation. Stop knocking that.”* Ghost grumbled. It wasn’t his fault that his powers and past experiences ensured he was perpetually stuck with a BMI index that ranged between “notably underweight” and “African child refugee”. He couldn’t gain a pound unless it was in pure muscle, and even then it would be the lean compact sort that wouldn’t do much for his image.

“Haha! Not as much as you’d think, but not for their lack of trying either. Gotta be careful who I’m with as a Bael and all. Genetics of a Pillar family are always in demand.” The large man grinned, not at all ashamed to talk “shop” with a prepubescent human child. He had heard enough about what Issei was like in passing to know that this was normal for the boy, and it wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

“Riser has decided. Both of you will die today.” Less and less of the Phoenix’s body was visible as the flames around him increased to the point that he was getting white hot.

“Yeah. Mhm. That’s nice Bird Person. You do that.” Issei completely ignored him and the increasing temperature of the area, already focusing all of his attention on Sairaorg. “So what’s your diet like? Do you just bulk up on proteins or is it an actual balanced diet and you burn off the excess with constantly working out? Or do you eat some kind of special devil meats and compounds that help accelerate and maintain your physical condition?”

“A bit of everything to be honest.” Sairaorg’s smile waned slightly as he took in Riser’s appearance and gathering power. "Uh, Issei was it? I think Riser might actually intend to try and kill us this time.”

“He does that sometimes.” The boy completely disregarded the danger he was in as he flipped up Sairaorg’s shirt from behind to look at his muscles. “Holy fuck you’re jacked. Be serious, how many times have you let someone eat off of your back? You’re doing the world a disservice if you say you haven’t yet.”

*“I agree with the kid. You could charge a premium with what you’ve got. Bitches be thirsty.”* Ghost agreed, knowing from personal experience.

“DIE ALL OF YOU!!”

BOOM!!!

Needless to say, the relationship between the three of them got off to a monumentally explosive start.

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Current Day:

Jasmine yawned as she sat at the reception desk of the Khaos Brigade, waiting to write in the next batch of morons and blood junkies that were either desperate or stupid enough to join the stupid club to “usurp the system”, “bring back the old ways” or whatever the current extremist on either side was screaming at the top of their lungs these days while piss drunk.

Morons, the lot of them.

Between dealing with this lot and pretending to be a prostitute for the upper class, she’d rather do the latter. At least they bathed regularly. And had good food. And had things worth stealing.

“Hoh? First day and we already have some nice eye candy.”

And they saved the dirty talk for when they actually had a shot of getting laid.

Really, the only reason why she stuck around these idiots was because someone needed to keep an eye on Ophis. It really went to show how messed up the world was when one of the top two heavy hitters needed a genuine babysitter.

“I take it you lot are new recruits?” Jasmine looked at the latest batch of Devils without a hint of interest, already reaching for the pile of registration forms and contracts at her feet. Despite the fact that there was only a desk between her and roughly two dozen men, women, and partial abominations, her behavior was more than peculiar. “How many are you?”

“There’s thirty two of us.” The leader, a large muscular man in a tank top with spikes covering his arms grinned. He took a sniff of the air and his smile widened. “Hoh? Isn’t this a surprise? What’s a human doing at the front of a shithole like this? I thought the brigade was Devils only?”

“You’re in for more surprises then.” She ignored his boring attempt to be intimidating. “The status quo pisses off more than you think. The organization has multiple factions. The Old Satan Faction just happens to be the biggest and recruits the most.”

She refrained from mentioning that the Old Satan Faction also consisted mainly of redshirts ready for the grinder.

“And what group is a tasty thing like you in? The *Human* faction?” He probed, leaning in more so that he was right over her desk.

How lovely, and predictable. Another Devil supremacist.

She took out the paperwork as though she didn’t even notice. “If you’re asking about the human dominated groups, there’s the Hero Faction, which consists primarily of descendants and reincarnates of past notable human figures, and to a lesser extent Nilren, which is where the majority of our magic specialists head to.”

She handed him the stack of papers. “Please take one each. Read, seal and sign with your blood. Let me know if your constitution prevents you from doing that and I will provide a substitute documentation to sign. Nobody is allowed further into the facility until you verify that you abide by the rules on them.”

The Devil scowled, clearly not appreciating or used to being dismissed like that. “Hey, woman. I asked you a question. What group are you in?”

Slowly, Jasmine’s right hand slipped into her sleeve to reach for something small…

“She’s part of Ophis’ personal guard you idiot, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your dick in your pants and stop humping her desk. We just got it replaced from the last idiot that thought they had a shot at her.” Before things escalated further, Vali walked from a side hallway. “Fuck Jas, give me a break. I know you’re hot, but I seriously can’t take a bathroom break without someone thinking they have a shot at your ass.”

“What can I say? Some girls just have it.” The seemingly helpless woman sighed whimsically.

“Personal guard? Ophis? You’re joking, right?” One of the other Devils snorted.

“You ever seen what the Oroboros does at bare minimum when she does bother to move?” Vali skeptically asked. “Our role isn’t to protect her. It’s to make sure she doesn’t have to do the job herself, you idiot.”

“Can’t be too hard if this piece of ass is part of the club.” The spike Devil leered hungrily at Jasmine.

The latter sighed and rolled her eyes…

Before anyone could react, her hand twitched, allowing a small tuning fork to enter her grasp. She then struck it lightly against the side of her table, allowing it to ring with a very specific pitch.

By itself it wouldn’t have done anything.

Combined with the hidden notes that she slipped inside the soft and pleasant background music of the facility, background music that she had taken part in making and singing on the other hand…

Thirty Devils reeled as several minor arteries in their heads ruptured simultaneously.

It wasn’t nearly enough to kill or render them unconscious, but none of them were going to be walking or seeing straight for at least the next half an hour.

Now if she used her voice or one of her other tuning forks, it would have been another matter entirely.

Vali was only other person fine due to the fact that he, and many of the more educated and informed members of the Khaos Brigade, made it a habit to put magic filters over their hearing whenever they entered a building that Jasmine had a hand in managing or frequenting.

“We are expecting several groups of inductees later today, so if you do not mind, please fill out your forms and proceed through the doors behind me.” Jasmine smiled kindly at the group of stunned Devils while slowly making a show of grabbing the ends of the fork with her other hand to silence it and their agony.

“Th-the fuck? Was that a Sacred Gear?” One of them stammered, confused and unnerved with now bloodshot eyes and leaking red fluid from the nose, much like the rest of his group.

“That, is above your pay grade.” Vali smirked. “Now then, I recommend you put your dicks away and do what the scary lady says before she gets worse. I can assure you all, she can and will get worse. It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve had to clean the reception hall of bodies before.”

It would be the seventh, actually.

She once suggested they put up a sign to save them all the trouble, but Vali and some of the others dismissed it. Either because they thought annoying her was funny, or because they had to set up a bottom line of competency somewhere.

If the noobies couldn’t figure out that the lone secretary for a criminal and violent organization could probably hold her own regardless of their appearance, then they probably weren’t going to last long regardless.

Fortunately, this batch of idiots weren’t dumb enough to push their luck, even if some were clearly debating it. Reluctantly, they all began to pass around the form and sign it. Due to their recent damage, they didn’t need to prick themselves for the blood to finish the contract.

Vali breathed out slowly as the group showed they were going to play ball.

“Something wrong?” She asked. “You don’t think this lot was going to be a problem, do you?”

“Not that. Something’s been bugging me since this morning. I can’t keep still because of it.” He relented. “Something not here. It’s like, I dunno, something big’s going to happen today somewhere.”

“Something big is always happening. Mostly because politicians are idiots bending over for old money or angry mobs.” She reasoned.

“Not that kind of big. More like, I can tell a massive volcano is going to go off soon and affect the global atmosphere, but not. And more importantly, it’s going to affect me personally in some way directly.” He shifted uncomfortably. “Thing is I know I’ve had this feeling before, but can’t remember when. And I don’t like it.”

“Hm. That is pretty big.” She dwelled on the topic for a few moments before shrugging helplessly and going back to the papers on her desk. “Too bad you’re stuck here with me then. No point in warning anyone this late in the game regardless. Anyways, the only monumental disaster I know of that might happen today is that asshole Riser’s party, and we are gosh darn out of invitations.”

“I know you’ve stated on many an occasion that you don’t have many fucks to give anymore in general, but that’s pretty careless, even for you.” Vali deadpanned.

She matched his with her own. “It’s Riser. As far as I’m concerned, he’s put under a literal permanent “fucks” ban. Given how much he’s pissed all of us off, I guess your instincts are telling you that Sirzechs or Kuroka are finally going to go postal on him there. Not that the traitor doesn’t deserve it. Better late than never. That said, if the fallout does somehow reach here, I’m counting on you to keep me alive.”

“You are probably the only person on the planet that is willing and shameless to tell a dragon to be their meatshield.” Judging from the look on Vali’s face, he clearly was under the impression that the source of his discomfort was something else, but he kept his mouth shut.

“Please. We all know you get off of it.” Jasmine was in the process of debating whether or not to play with this latest batch of meat sacks further by asking questions while humming a tune or two to agitate their head injuries, when something in her pocket buzzed.

It was her cell phone, obviously, but for most calls she had it set to ring. There were only a few numbers that actually buzzed, all of which were high priority.

One glance at the caller ID indicated that it was just that.

She glared at Vali, indicating that she didn’t want to be interrupted before answering. “What’s wrong?”

The line was silent for several ominous seconds before she got a reply. “… I’m crashing Bird Person’s party tonight.”

Jasmine’s face went pale. There was a reason why she and Issei never contacted one another through direct means until they saw one another in person a month ago. Be it email, phone call, or magic. When they did rarely, it was with burner phones and addresses that were used a handful of times before being discarded.

Instead, they usually used a roundabout method of communication through several forums with alternate names and hints.

Or, if they were desperate, Kuroka was used as an in between.

Some might have said it was too much, but there was a reason for the secrecy.

Between all the security and oversight both suffered under, it was for the best to minimize what they spoke and talked about as much as possible.

Even from the Factions.

The leaders of the mythological world had suspected something was up, but whether it was out of guilt, pity, ignorance, or whatever, none of the leaders had ever questioned what Issei’s fractured group was doing behind their backs. Most likely assuming that they simply desired some well deserved privacy.

For Issei to break the silence on an unsecure line… meant that he was going to do something big and soon. Something that was going to change the game.

“Issei…” She stammered, completely caught off guard.

“Did you know?” He asked, his voice far too calm to be a good sign. “That Snowball was going after Weeb because of me?”

It was that last part that sent chills down her spine.

*“Because of me.”*

It was that line of thinking that rooted the worst of Issei’s insecurities into his psyche. His guilt complex was the source of so many of his worst and self-destructive habits, that wasn’t porn related, that his picture might as well be put next to it in the dictionary.

“Issei, I want you to calm down and listen to me.” She ignored the sudden look of alarm on Vali’s face as he heard her. “Yes. Vali and I did know about the situation for a while, but we can’t do anything from here. We’ve all dealt with nobles before. You know we aren’t in a position to affect things even if we wanted to.”

“You could have warned me.”

Oh boy. That was not a good sign.

“You know that it would have only made things worse. Those two princesses, both of them are spoiled brats and a pain in the ass, but they clearly were in the dark. More than you. You would have taken it out on them if you were informed prematurely and then blame yourself for *that* shit show. Don’t try to deny it.”

“…”

Jasmine took advantage of it to keep talking. “And that wasn’t even counting the fact that you were getting better. You really were. Asami, Azazel, Vali, me. We all saw it and didn’t want to ruin your progress.”

“And that was enough not to warn me right before all this bullshit happened?” He held his ground, but Jasmine could hear the tiny micro fractures in his voice. She was one of the few people that he could rarely ever win an argument with after all.

“We didn’t know. Last I was informed before the announcement, everything was slated for mid to late fall at the earliest. Having it now caught us all by surprise. We thought there was more time. Telling you prematurely in your current state… you would have gotten the wrong idea and pushed them away. More than you try to do now.”

The line was silent. Ominously so.

“Issei?” She asked worriedly.

“… I’m bringing the six month job.” He stated firmly.

“Wait what?” She blinked before her mind caught up with what she had just heard. “Wait. You’re bringing the… Issei, *no*. No no no no no no. That is a *terrible* idea. That’s our fucking secret weapon you are talking about. We talked about this. Fuck, you were the one that talked *me* out of busting it out when we first finished it.”

“Nee-san, I’m about to crash a Devil Noble party packed to the gills with the most insufferable, greedy, selfish, and self-serving members of Devil aristocracy. Most of whom we already *know* and have past experiences with. All in *one place*, and with their *guards completely down*.”

Her arguments got caught in her throat as she realized what he was insinuating.

If Issei wasn’t aiming *just* for Riser during this shit show…

She opened and closed her mouth several times, unsure of what to say or ask in the wake of this revelation. There was potential here. A great deal of it to bend and twist and fuck over a great many people, if not the world, this night.

In ways that even the main Factions didn’t know about.

“I thought you hated doing politics.” She finally asked.

“I do. And I’m going to generously spread that hate all over everyone tonight till their insides are coated in it so they can all taste it.”

“What do you plan on doing with them?”

“I’m going to be Jordan Belfort, and sell them the pen that they’ll fuck themselves with.”

The only thing she did know, was that it would not be quiet.

She should have taken Vali’s feelings more seriously. The next few weeks were going to be a bitch to work through.

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Riser didn’t want to admit it, but he was getting butterflies in his stomach.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t because he was about to cement his engagement with a beautiful young wife.

“Still no word from Lucifer?” He asked Yuballuna as she entered his room.

“None yet.” She denied, pretending to ignore his pacing. “He is occupied with greeting the guests. Something many are curious you aren’t doing.”

Maybe because that would put him next to said man and tempt fate by the second? No thank you. “Riser will be out in due time. Perhaps some private greetings in bulk would be better for now with the more notable guests.”

“Of course. It would give them a good impression of you before you greet the audience at large. A sense of exclusivity.” His queen agreed.

“Mmm.” He nodded, turning his half assed idea into an order. “Riser will leave it to you then. Anything to report otherwise? No issues? What of R-my bride to be?” He fumbled over Rias’ name before correcting himself. It was improper to say it just yet. Not here.

“Nothing is amiss so far. The party is uninterrupted, and Rias Gremory is still being prepared in her room.” Yuballuna reported. “Her peerage is currently in the main hall with the rest of the guests. From what I can tell, they are gathering quite the attention.”

He snorted. After their display during the rating game, it would difficult to imagine those children not garnering some curiosity. “And their wounds?”

“They are still recovering, but well enough to attend. Your donation of extra Phoenix Tears did not go unnoticed.”

“Don’t patronize me. The less reason Kuroka and the Maou have to come for our heads than they already do, the better.” He snorted. As far as he was concerned, outside of Rias and Shirone, or Koneko, or whatever she was called now, the rest of the peerage could be bedridden by now. However, he still had an image to uphold and it wouldn’t do if he simply treated those two and not the others. If asked, he’d just play it off as furthering his fiancée’s debt to him.

Knock Knock.

The conversation was interrupted by someone at the door, which was opened soon afterwards to expose Ravel looking in nervously. “Brother. Yuballuna. We have a guest that wishes to have a word with you.”

Whatever confusion was on the pair’s face was soon wiped away as a familiar large figure entered with Ravel.

“… Sairaorg.” Riser Phoenix’s tone was cool and calm, his eyes never straying from his guest.

“Riser.” Sairaorg Bael’s was just as controlled, his normally amicable and easy going face now impassive and hard to read.

The room was dead quiet for several more seconds.

“Having second thoughts?” Sairaorg broke it, his voice with a small hint of concern.

“Humph. Don’t be ridiculous. Even if Riser did have them, it is too late now.” The host huffed bitterly.

“Brother, you don’t…” Ravel tried to cut in, only to be stopped by a shaking head.

“No, Riser does. What is one more disastrous mistake to me at this point? At least this one will yield *some* good from it.” Her brother sighed.

“If there ever was a point to quit it would have been during the Rating Game.” Sairaorg agreed. “Who would have thought that Gremory’s peerage could put up that much of a fight, much less pull off Carousel of all things? To push you enough to show your hand, none of us were expecting it. There’s enough attention on this mess as it is.”

“Supposedly, Jasmine and Vali have been making moves as of late. According to your sister.” Riser grimaced.

“You know that I don’t like you calling her that. She’s blood at best.” The muscular man scowled, a rare show of utter distaste for anyone really considering how friendly and amicable he was to pretty much everyone he met.

Family didn’t do what she did. Carnelian was merely related to him. Just like the other monsters in the Bael family.

“Riser apologizes.” He absently nodded, not for the first time making the mistake but genuinely meaning it nonetheless.

“… Is it true? Are Vali and Jasmine out again?” Sairaorg frowned.

“Wouldn’t you know?” Yuballuna asked.

“You know my situation. Ever since I was removed as heir, I’ve been nothing more than a political tool to my father and extended relations. If it weren’t for Carnelian’s whims and my value as a public figure, I probably would have been executed behind the scenes by now.”

And wasn’t that just another disaster to deal with? The Bael family in general tolerated Sairaorg’s existence because of the good publicity he gave them despite the fact they considered him “trash” for not having the family’s Power of Destruction. So long as kept on winning Rating Games and not “tarnishing the Bael name”, they even accepted him as the Heir.

At least until Carnelian came.

Apparently, being pure of blood didn’t matter to those hypocrites as much as possessing the Power of Destruction, and gratuitous amounts of financial income and resources. Legal or not.

As far as they were concerned now, Sairaorg was now just a valuable piece they could play and do whatever with within reason so long as his mother was still in their range of influence.

A soldier.

A pawn.

A political tool for negotiations between houses...

“You forgot the fact that it would be a pain to kill you now.” Riser scoffed sarcastically, getting Sairaorg to laugh almost mockingly in tandem.

Right, there was that too.

Riser may have a foot in the Ultimate class territory, but Sairaorg knew Presence, and that changed everything for him.

Everyone in their old group knew it. Including Carnelian. And she knew what the potential damages were if she ever went too far with him like she mistakenly did with Issei. So much so that she surprisingly didn’t even try to get him to teach her or others the secret of the peculiar ability in the five years since everything fell apart.

“They were seen in Kuoh recently. Just before the Rating game was announced.” Yuballuna confirmed, getting them all back on track.

“Those two, I want to say it’s just like them to stir up trouble at the worst time possible on purpose, but that would be hypocritical given our situation.” The guest shook his head with a bitter laugh.

“… Why are you here, Sairaorg? To meet us in private just when everything is about to finalize, is something amiss? Why risk suspicion now?” Ravel spoke up warily, and not simply out of concern.

There was a reason why Sairaorg had been unable to communicate with the bulk of their old friends these past five years.

In fact, the only people of the group he could get in contact with during that time without causing problems were in the room right now, plus Carnelian.

The large man crossed his arms and grimaced, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. A rare display of uncertainty in his normally solid and strong stature. “I have a bad feeling. Something about tonight doesn’t set well with me. It started a few days ago and it’s only been getting worse.”

“Is Carnelian up to something?” Yuballuna asked.

“Is water wet?” Riser sarcastically mocked.

“Look.” Sairaorg cut in forcefully. “I something’s going to happen tonight. Something bigger than we expect. I don’t know what, but I can feel it. Keep your guards up. All of you. I don’t think tonight is going to end quietly.”

Wonderful. Fucking fantastic. This was the last thing Riser needed at this point. He turned to Yuballuna.

“I’ll double check with security before heading to the main hall to see if anything’s amiss.” She understood his silent order instantly.

“I’ll meet with the guests and see if they have seen or heard anything.” Ravel nodded.

“And Riser… will meet with his intended and Lucifer.” The Phoenix relented with a heavy sigh. He had been putting off interacting with those two as much as possible. It was not going to be pleasant, but outside of himself, they were the highlighted guests of the party. It would only compound the disaster if something did happen and it was found out that he didn’t try to warn them ahead of time.

Sairaorg couldn’t help but laugh at Riser’s souring mood. “You’re finally acting like you’re about to get married and meet with the new family.”

“Don’t make tonight’s disaster be your corpse, Bael.” Riser halfheartedly grumbled as he left the room, soon followed by his Queen, who bowed politely before vanishing.

“Sairaorg…” Ravel, on the other hand, stayed behind, looking apologetically at him.

“Go.” The man smiled gently.

“But…”

“It’s not your fault, little bird. Nor is it mine. Your brother has already made his decision. Now go. He will need your help tonight.”

There was more that both of them wished to say, but now wasn’t the time. There was much to do.

With a final look back, Ravel bowed and left the room, leaving Sairaorg alone.

“… Well well, nya. What a strange turn of events. I came expecting a chicken, and I get a gorilla.”

Or so he thought.

o. o. o.

He could do this. He could do this. He could do this.

“Issei-sama, your breathing is growing labored again.”

Trying his best not to make a cutting remark to Grayfia, knowing she was only trying to help, Issei reined in his anxiety as much as possible and tried to breathe normally again.

How long had they been in the private waiting room preparing him with proper clothes and cleaning him up again? Two hours? An hour and a half? An hour at the very most.

He looked at the clock on the wall.

It had been twenty minutes.

Mother fucking anxiety fueled internal time dilation!!

He was convinced. That clock was clearly in cahoots with his showerhead. There was no other explanation for such evil to exist otherwise. It must die.

His body jolted as Grayfia straightened his outer jacket and cleaned his hair, snapping him out of his internal panic attack induced raging.

“You are stressed.” She stated factually with an impassive expression.

He gave her a look that was globally accepted and interpreted as “are you fucking kidding me right now?!”

The maid shook her head slightly, although for her that in itself was a dramatic display of emotion. “… Alicah is growing strong. Would you like to see some pictures of her?”

The change in topic instantly had an effect as his breathing stopped entirely.

He licked his lips and looked around, stalling for time to think of something to say. “She, she isn’t here, is she?”

“She’s safe with Millicas at a secure location with handpicked guards, don’t worry.” Grayfia’s faint smile grew slightly.

“No problems? No episodes? Her mfr, bp, heart rate-” His mind quickly began to run rampantly again before the maid cut him off again.

“You know better than anyone. You’re the one that requests and is sent updates every week to stay on top of her health. She hasn’t had any relapses since she was two. You said it yourself, once she grows past being a toddler the worst is behind us. She’s a bright and strong beautiful child that does not have a cruel or flawed bone in her body. Now would you like to see the pictures?”

“I… yeah. Yeah. If you have them.”

The rest of the hour passed with a significantly quieter Issei, looking forlornly at camera photos of a small girl with ash white hair ending in red tips at the end smiling happily and playing with her brother and parents. All the while the mother slash maid finished preparing him for the party and likely disaster that was to come.

o. o. o.

“What’s with this dress?” Rias shook her head as the Phoenix maids finished preparing her for the party. With the top of her chest and shoulders completely exposed, long white gloves and golden accessories, the beautiful young woman looked prepared for an entirely different celebration. “It looks like a wedding gown. How tasteless.”

“Don’t be like that, Rias.” With a whirl of flames, Riser smirked as teleported in the room.

“Riser-sama, you mustn’t be here.” One of the women chastised. “This room is for women only.”

“Relax. It’s not like there haven’t been enough rules broken and bent as of late already.” He waved her off, although he was speaking as much about his actions as others. “As the star of the festivities tonight, I’m allowed as much. Ah, my mistake. Riser is certain that the star will be the bride to be as far as the guests are concerned.”

“In such tasteless presentation? Don’t take me as a fool, Riser. I’m being paraded around like a prize tonight.” Rias glared at him.

“Humph. After being humiliated during our bout in front of our peers, it is the least you could offer as compensation.” Her elder looked down at her. “Don’t play ignorant Rias. You are well aware of how much attention you garnered. Dismissing your talent would harm Riser as much as anyone else. No, your immaculate appearance is only to highlight the great bonding between the Phoenix and Gremory houses. The resulting power between us will be something truly momentous to witness in the future.”

She’d rather be blind for it then.

His smirk twitched as her scowl deepened at the mentioning of the future. “Haha. You certainly seem eager for it. Don’t worry. I assure you, the dress you will wear for our wedding will put all others in the underworld to shame. You shall stand as a beauty with wings of flame!”

With a grand flourish of power, he vanished in a wave of fire.

“He certainly is full of himself.” Akeno hummed as she walked into the room with Koneko. “The fool can’t even bother with walking between rooms.”

“Akeno-sama. You shouldn’t disrespect Riser-sama like that.” One of the maids in the room frowned.

“Say that after he sets you on fire.” Koneko dryly riposted, causing the woman to back down.

“We will take care of the final touch ups from here.” Akeno gently advised. “A few Gremory secret touchups, if you understand what I mean.”

Knowing the three wanted privacy, even if it went against their orders, the maids left the room and closed the door behind them.

“How are you holding up?” Akeno asked.

“I’m getting engaged to that ass Riser.” Rias all but growled.

“I mean other than that.” She patiently pressed.

“… I’m managing.” The King relented before motioning to her current garb. “But honestly, look how tacky this dress is. My breasts are all but falling out. I look like, like…”

“Like you’re in a bad porno.” Koneko smirked ever so slightly, catching her two elders by surprise.

“…”

“… Snrk.”

“Pfft.”

“Ha! Hahahaha!”

The three young women couldn’t even manage to hold back their laughter for five seconds before bursting out in hysterics.

“Ahaha! You’re absolutely right! How tasteless can this get!?” Rias hunched over with a wide smile.

“Fufufu! Can you imagine what Issei would say if he saw you like this?” Akeno held a hand to her mouth, not that it did anything.

“Heh. He’d probably rip apart the maids and the designers for their “trash taste” and run them out of the building crying.” Koneko allowed herself to show genuine amusement at the idea of letting the erratic nutjob run rampant among the Phoenix household. Let someone else suffer dealing with his madness for once.

The three continued to laugh unbridled for another minute before finally calming down.

“Aha. Ah… He probably knows by now, even if no one has told him. He’s not a fool.” Rias’ good mood slowly died as her mind drifted to Issei again for the hundredth time since she woke up from the Rating Game. It was both the source of her strength getting through the past few days, and her despair in not seeing him again.

“I still think one of us should have seen him.” Akeno’s smile turned sad.

“It wouldn’t have done anything except made things worse.” Koneko shook her head. “You don’t expect him to show up to this stupid thing, do you?”

“Well, if there was a guaranteed way to stop this disaster from going through…” Rias whimsically hoped.

“But at what cost?” Akeno shook her head before pausing, her eyes glazing over in a dreamlike thought. “Mmmm, at what cost?”

“Down girl. Stop getting off on imagining everyone in the party suffering.” Koneko snapped her fingers.

“… Not everyone.”

“Hmhm. That’s enough you two. We’re not that cruel. Yet.” Rias giggled, in a far better mood than before. “Come, help me put on the final touches before I make a fool of myself. It’s going to be a long night, and at the very least, I want to look good for it.”

How ironic that her words ran more true than she would ever guess.

o. o. o.

“I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.”

He was just a few steps away from the doors to the main hall, where the main festivities had already begun. Grayfia stood behind him dutifully as support.

“Remember, this is just to acclimate you. You don’t have to enter the hall just yet.” She reminded him. “If you can’t handle it, we can wait for my lord husband to announce your being here.”

Her words would have held weight if he didn’t already have other plans for the night. Plans that needed to be put in motion *before* Sirzechs made his move.

Before he could make some snappy comment about being fine or play off how “not” stressed he was, the doors opened to some meaningless guests from inside the hall making way for the bathroom or something else.

Issei didn’t notice that though.

Instead he simply saw the room full of people in front of him, and he froze as though a bucket of ice water had been poured over him.

It was like time had gone in slow motion. All those people. All those voices. All those *eyes.* All of them about to look right at him. Again. Again. Again.

*Again again again again again again again again again again again again again again again again…*

He wasn’t the Sekiryuutei anymore. He didn’t remember anything about Rias Gremory, Riser Phoenix, or that there was some engagement party.

All he could recall was being a small child again with countless people crowding around him, yelling at him, blaming him, and chipping away at the few things that he still cared about…

The next moment he had turned around and was quickly and stiffly walking the other way in a cold sweat.

“Nope. Nope. Nope. Nope. No. Nein. Niet. Non. I can’t do this. I can’t do this. No. Seriously, no. Hell No. Fuck NO. Not going to happen. Nope. Nope.”

The world was twisting around him. The air was getting thick. His insides contorted in a way that would make a French gymnast jealous. He couldn’t stay here. He needed to get away from the eyes and voices. He needed a moment of peace. He needed to focus. He needed his den. He needed Porn. He needed…

“Hughaaaaaaa!!!”

Oh. A toilet worked too.

Fortunately, in his blind panic, he had managed to find a bathroom and unloaded his stomach into it. Great job subconscious.

*“It wasn’t your subconscious you idiot. I half guided your body with the maid’s help to this chamber while you were having another episode.”* Ddraig chided.

Oh. He stood corrected. Great job Ddraig.

*“Don’t thank me for something as ridiculous as this.”* The dragon sarcastically refused the thanks.

Stingy.

“Are you all right?” Grayfia asked from just outside the stall.

“I’m Huaaaagh! Frenching a toilet. Does it look like I’m fine?” He asked between heaves.

“Considering the toilet still appears intact and functional, I’d hazard semi-capable.” If Issei didn’t know Grayfia and himself as well as he did, he’d almost assume that was a joke.

“Semi-capable my aaaaugh!” He spat as his stomach contorted. Lovely. He was hitting the stomach acid now. His strained eyes pierced her cool ones. “Fuck joining the party. I won’t be able to even get in the damn room. It’s not happening.”

She knew he wasn’t stretching the truth out of fear. He meant it. “Are you certain?”

He let out a bark of a laugh before spitting a final time into the ceramic bowl and slowly heaving himself up, clearly still disoriented from his panic attack. Fortunately, none of his bile had gotten onto his borrowed suit. “I took one look in there and this is what happened. They weren’t even looking at me or noticed I existed, and I all but lost it. Do you have any idea how bad it might get once they realize who I am? What I am?”

Grayfia’s expression softened slightly. Ajuka had warned them. Azazel had warned them. Issei had warned them. And yet she and Sirzechs had pushed forward with this desperate plan regardless.

Issei was trying. He really was. But his inner demons and wounds were not something that could be so easily disregarded or ignored. He had his limits, and unfortunately they were far shorter than what all of them had hoped.

So she bowed deeply. “You are right. You were all right. We were warned repeatedly, and yet we held hope in our desperation that these limitations could be managed. For that gross disrespect, I can only apologize with all my heart Issei.”

The teen didn’t curse her out, or mock her display, or say anything for that matter. He merely watched her with tired eyes, sighed and stumbled past her. “Save it for later. I managed to make it into this literal hole in hell. Might as well make something of it. Somehow.”

The weight in the woman’s chest lightened somewhat. Issei truly was too kind for his own good. Literally in this particular case, seeing as he still intended to do something that would no doubt cause his trauma to act up in the long run. “I will escort you to a location where you can meet my husband in private. We can discuss a contingency plan there.”

“It better be something good.” He walked out the bathroom slowly and leaned against the wall. There weren’t nearly as many people here, but there were enough to put him on guard. Mostly security and catering for the guests. “One way or another we need a way to minimize me freaking out while keeping me around others and somehow keep me awake. Most drugs don’t do shit for long, and it’s not like you have a constant supply of uninhi…bitors… on hand… here. Huh.”

It took Grayfia only a few seconds to focus on what the teen was looking at, and another few to realize what he was getting at. “Issei. No.”

“Unless you have a better idea, Issei yes.”

“This is a terrible idea.”

“We’ve already established the entirety of me being here is that. The redundancy won’t be noticed.”

“You will be somehow even more unhinged than normal.” She wasn’t even trying to be polite about his personality this time.

“Woman do you want me in that room or not? Now hurry up and prepare to ensure that I won’t regret this disaster until *after* I pass out, or something worse or nightmarish happens. We’ve already established that bad will be the default outcome of this.”

At this point, Grayfia genuinely didn’t know what would qualify as either. She only hoped that most of the fallout would be bearable in the oncoming weeks. Or fall on someone else’s head.

o. o. o.

“Sairaorg. Fancy seeing you here. You rarely show up to anything these days.” The muscular man turned to see Sona Sitri approach him in a modest dress for the night’s festivities.

“Ah. Sona. Long time no see. Yes, I’ve been a bit tied up lately.” He smiled kindly with a drink in hand. “How’s your sister? I see she’s still invested in the entertainment industry.”

That was the politically correct way of saying that she was perpetually dressed like a magical girl and doing shows in her spare time.

“What you see is usually what you get with her. Not that most people complain really. She is good at her job.” The sister of the Maou grumbled as she took a sip of her own drink. “You looked distracted.”

“I, yes. Sorry about that. I thought I saw something… familiar for a moment a little while ago. Something that would stick out like a sore thumb.” He shook his head dismissing the impossibility. “Never mind my delusions. How are you enjoying the night’s festivities? You are friends with my cousin after all.”

Now wasn’t that a loaded question if she heard one. “It’s suitable for one hosted by the Phoenix family. Affluent food, decor, guests and setting.”

Sairaorg smirked. “In other words, obnoxious and suffocating.”

“Not the choice of words I would use at the moment.” She evasively took another sip while a small smile played on her lips.

“Humph. Riser’s always been like that. It takes someone just as stubborn and bullheaded as he is to counter all that pomp and ego he has. Which in turn only makes things even more ridiculous when that comes about.” The large man laughed.

“I’ve been told you speak from experience.”

It was the knowing way that she replied that caught his attention. Looking around warily for a moment, he nodded. “You could say that. We did train under the same master for a while. Way out in one of the wildlife preserves.”

“I can hardly imagine Riser doing anything laborious like that, much less venture into the wilderness.” She scoffed.

“Why do you think his family forced him to do it?” Sairaorg grinned, getting a laugh out of her.

“Ara ara. What a surprise seeing you two here.” Akeno appeared with a clearly panicking Gasper and an annoyed Koneko. “Would you two care to entertain us for a moment?”

“You reached your limits on newfound fans I take it.” Sona didn’t miss the small crowd of people eyeing the Gremory peerage hungrily in the background.

“People scary. People scary.” Gasper recited a mantra while clearly horrified as he breathed deeply into a paper bag. That said, the fact that he hasn’t freaked out and frozen time at the party was clearly a step of progress. Yet.

“They won’t stop bugging us about how we trained.” Koneko growled, clearly annoyed. “Gaspy’s got it the worst out of all of us. Everyone wants to know where he came from and what his powers are.”

“Haha. Well you can hardly blame them. It’s rare for a chronomancer to fall into the hands of a peerage. Much less a deceptively powerful one, Gasper was it? You were without question the most notable participant of the rating game. Everyone’s talking about you. You’re going to have many interested followers in the future, without a doubt.” Sairaorg laughed and gently-ish, patted the small boy on the back, causing him to stumble.

“Mgh.” Unsurprisingly, Gasper didn’t take too well to that if his increased shivering and tears was any indication.

“Where’s Kiba?” Sona asked, changing the topic before the vampire really did lose what control he had left.

“Somewhere nearby running interference.” Akeno smiled almost too innocently. “Next to Gasper, he provided the most interest in our new following. Primarily with the fairer crowd. And fortunately for us, they came with their husbands tonight. Fufufu.”

And potentially unfortunately for Kiba. True to Devil culture and habits, many members of aristocracy were not monogamous, or heterosexual. Fighting them all off was all but a lost cause. He could only stall and wait for backup against such numbers.

His sacrifice would not be forgotten.

“Ah right, the sword maker. Quite a versatile Sacred Gear he has. Not that his martial skills are any less impressive.” Sairaorg nodded. “My own knight has shown interest in crossing blades with him eventually. Although, preferably without the tricks this time.”

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem.” Koneko deadpanned. “We weren’t exactly thrilled with the tactics we used either. They were more or less forced on us. Literally.”

“My name is Gasper.” Gasper whimpered.

“Ignore him. Our, trainer, was very eccentric when preparing us.” The small girl struggled to pick an adequate word to describe Issei.

“I can relate. I knew quite a number of the sort a while back.” Sairaorg grinned. “Mad and unhinged as could be, but unrelentingly honest.”

Considering the fact that “Issei” translated to “honesty”, it wasn’t surprising that the wordplay didn’t go over their heads. All the younger Devils looked at him skeptically.

“Personally, some people could do with a little less of it from time to time.” Sona picked her words carefully.

“Those that deal with politics often do.” Sairaorg’s smile widened. “I’ve found they can’t handle dealing with raw simple truths constantly, as unpleasant as it is.”

“That may be, but it could do with a bit more, timing.” Akeno threw in her two cents, causing the man to laugh.

“Haha. Yes, I won’t argue with that. There is a time and a place for honesty after all.” His smile died off slowly. “Certainly not here though.”

The others shivered as one. The very idea of Issei being at this party, they couldn’t even imagine how that would turn out. Much less the fallout that would come from it.

“Wait. You know…” Gasper started to ask before he was interrupted.

Not by a sound or a gesture.

*The lion of the underworld examines the newcomers with curiosity.*

But with a simple feeling that rang through their very instincts.

Koneko almost dropped her drink and looking around frantically, only to see that the party was going on without any interruption or abnormality.

“That was…” Akeno balked, completely unexpecting this turn of events.

“You, actually know… but you are…” Sona’s eyes widened as her mind ran at a million miles a second.

“There’s a good deal about my situation that we can discuss later in a more appropriate location. As of right now, I am simply a guest for tonight’s events.” He cut her off before she said too much. “Honesty is well and good at times, but for others secrets in silence is for the best. I think we can all agree to that.”

“R-right.” All four of them nodded in agreement.

“Wait,” Sona frowned. “Does that mean you are also familiar with those two as well? The woman and the, ass?”

Sairaorg snickered as he saw Sona struggle with trying to find a better moniker for Vali. “Ha. Those two. It’s been a while since I’ve heard of them. How are they doing?”

“Fine, if you consider nearly blowing our heads up from the inside a good thing.” Koneko grumbled.

“Yeah, that sounds like her. Someone must have annoyed her. She was probably playing with you.” He dismissed the girl’s gripe.

“How’s that?” Gasper asked.

“Did she have a tuning fork out? Or did she sound like she had multiple voices at once?”

“I don’t believe so…” Akeno trailed off warily.

“Then you’re fine. All she did was rupture some minor blood vessels in your heads to stun you a bit. At worst it’s disorienting and stuns you for a moment. She does it all the time to make herself look tough without causing any real damage. Basic fear tactics. Can’t say it doesn’t work either. Got me with it too the first time we met.” He waved off their anger dismissively. “Jas is… I can’t say a good person, but she isn’t evil either. She has things she cares about, and she has a hard limit to her patience. So long as you work with those two things in mind, she’s easy to get along with. As for “Ass man”, he’s as passive as you can get most of the time if it doesn’t set off his obsession with getting into good fights. Total battle junkie that one.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Koneko deadpanned, clearly not having a better perspective on the woman in question.

“Speaking of which, I wonder how much stronger he’s gotten over the past few years…” Sairaorg mused to himself, a glint of hunger sparked in his eyes.

“Ara. Looks like our mutual acquaintance isn’t the only one that hungers for some extensive activity every now and then.” Akeno laughed.

“You don’t get into my exquisite shape simply to look good, ma’am.” He grinned childishly while flexing just enough to show off his muscles though his suit without tearing apart the entire thing in the middle of the party.

He had done that once. It was incredibly embarrassing.

What made it worse was that he had been with Issei at the time and the little nut had told him to “own his sexy himbo-ness for the masses”, and he did just that, flexing for the crowd and playing it off as a joke.

On the plus side, the show of confidence (and his ripped abs) had worked, and he had managed to divert the worst of the accidental social faux pas.

On the other hand, he had suffered nearly six months of not so private booty calls from the more lonely and aged members of elite Devil society like he was some exclusive top-grade gigolo.

And the pictures. The pictures he could do without.

“Fufu. I may take you up on your offer one day, though I’m afraid you aren’t my type for anything more than that. I prefer my partners more… pliable.” With a sensual gesture of brushing her hand against her mouth, Akeno eyed Sairaorg in a way that dared him to keep going.

Before the conversation could continue, they were interrupted by Kiba of all people barging in with less grace than he was frequently seen with.

“We have a problem.” He managed to whisper, looking at Sona and his teammates with alert eyes.

“How so?” Sona was immediately at attention.

Before he could utter another word however…

*An eye opened. The beast remembered it was STARVING, and became irritated.*

On the other side of the main hall, half of the glassware in the area shattered at once.

o. o. o.

Several minutes ago:

Salaia Berith hummed in mild amusement along with her husband Alac Berith, formerly of a branch house of the Stolas family. Both of black hair and elegant appearance, though Salaia was of a short and wide build to her husband’s thin and lanky one. Her family was of a warrior decent while his of more intellectual. The pair were standing off to the side of the party with drinks in their hand.

As members of the Seventy Two pillars, this party was just one of dozens of festivities she was obligated to attend every year, and to be quite frank they all blurred one into another as far as she was concerned. The same faces. The same rumors. The same nonsense. Rarely did she ever encounter anything new and meaningful these days that wasn’t spoiled in the grapevine weeks in advance.

Rather instead of participating in these events to the fullest, she had instead taken a more, exciting hobby of a more carnal nature when events died down. Salacious activities during these parties were not uncommon, however she had taken an enjoyment to more, radical, locations and times for them.

Subtly she slipped out some small pills from her purse and reached for her drink.

And if she happened to be trying to get pregnant with some substances that benefitted the action and the experience, all the better…

“Oh? Well what a surprise? I didn’t expect the Desperate Duo to be here.”

She froze. As did her husband.

She didn’t recognize the voice entirely. But there was only person that had ever dared to call individuals of their stature that humiliating title.

And he was supposed to be dead.

Approaching them to the side was a young man, a *human*, with a wide, twisted smile that sent shivers down their spines. It wasn’t that the expression was one that promised pain or malintent, but rather that the smile itself was just, *wrong.* That it fundamentally should not exist or be there at all.

The twisted existence of the smile was so distracting that they didn’t even notice the existence of Lucifer’s wife dutifully following him closely from behind…

… Carrying a tray loaded with champaign glasses. Champaign that the newcomer was downing almost instantly and swapping with a new glass every few seconds.

Human or not, it was blatantly obvious that the young man was purposefully trying to get as drunk as possible if the flush on his face was any indication.

“Issei, Hyoudou.” Salaia almost whispered his name in astonishment and horror. “Sekiryuutei. You’re, alive?”

“… Eh. Living’s a subjective term.” The monster in human skin shrugged before making eye contact with them, and once more causing rampant tremors to assault their spines.

They were eyes of a dead man, a corpse, and yet that still did not prevent the corpse from being set alight. There was still fire in him. A vicious inferno that was just barely being kept in check.

For now.

“You two are looking… well like shit.” The hypocrisy of his comment was not missed by anyone. The teen stepped forward unstably into their private space without any hesitation, leaning in to examine the terrified woman’s face up close. “Yeah. Definitely like shit.”

“Stay away from my wife you monster.” Alac snarled, though didn’t do much else than that. The man was too scared to even try to accost the teen harassing his significant other. “What are you doing here? Are you here for revenge against us? Against Phoenix? Against Bael?”

Issei blinked and looked at the man surprised, before snorting in genuine amusement. Despite the topic of conversation, he truly found what the Devil said hilarious.

“Revenge? Against *you two*? Snrk.” He chuckled and stepped back, stumbling for a moment in his intoxicated state. “You lied to me, stole from me, pulled your support from the project at the worst possible time, spread rumors about how counterproductive I was, and spied on me. And you think I want revenge?”

For a moment the two thought that he was going to attack them, right in front of Grayfia and in the middle of the party.

And then Issei began to giggle even harder. “Hahaha. Why would I do that when you’re already shafted harder than a Greek Demigod? It’s like beating a dead horse at this point.”

Whatever they had been expecting, it had not been that. They weren’t sure if that was worse than what they had expected either once his words finally registered.

Alec licked his lips, suddenly feeling more panicked than he should. “What do you mean by that?”

Issei snickered, his dead eyes never looking away from Salaia’s. “You think I wouldn’t see the symptoms or your shoddy attempts to hide them? Green sclarea. Unnaturally dilated pupils. The roots of your hair are dyed to hide the tint of color in your follicles.” His nose flared. “Elevated estrogen and hormones in hyperactive sweat glands (I recommend you change your perfume and deodorant by the way if you actually want to hide that). Plus there’s the fact that you’re packing some right now… Snowball’s been keeping you supplied for some time.”

“So what?” Salaia snarled glancing at Grayfia who had yet to do or say a damn thing since she had arrived. No, if anything, the powerful woman looked at her with pity and mild discomfort as though she knew what was coming and had resigned herself to the outcome. “Are you going to tell us that we are using a shoddy product that didn’t meet your ridiculous standards? Or that we are stuck in some grand conspiracy child?”

The teen blinked with confused blurred eyes, opened his mouth, paused, grabbed another two glasses of champaign from Grayfia’s tray to down them in quick succession, and finally answered. “Do you two idiots even remember why I stalled the product at the last moment?”

“You said it wasn’t complete yet. Again. It was the fifth time you delayed the outcome much to everyone’s infinite ire.” Alac frowned. “In spite of other experts claiming otherwise.”

“Yeah. Paid “Experts” that still don’t know shit about the production process other than the bare basics.” He shook his head. “Ones that ignored the complications from my test groups. Including the ones from Gray-chan behind me.”

The maid pretended not to acknowledge that particular disaster. She had almost lost Alicah at the five-month mark of her pregnancy due to complications from the drug that nobody had expected at the time. Fortunately, Issei and Jasmine had been quick to respond but it had been close.

Afterwards, Issei had hovered over her constantly and protectively as though she had been carrying his child instead of Sirzech’s. So much so that they had a running joke going on that Alicah was more his daughter than her husband’s. The fact that Issei didn’t really fight it only underscored just how important her daughter was to all of them.

“Your point?” Salaia growled.

“My *point* is that Snowball was working with an imperfect brew from the start, she’s not a medical scientist, and the odds of her getting it right, with or without the Bael’s help, are as likely as me ever being a functional human being ever again. Meaning whatever she has been peddling out to you idiots these past few years might as well be snake oil.”

His words slowly began to sink in.

Everything that had been produced by Ars Nova after the handover were just imitation projects and experiments that paled compared to what the original makers could conjure.

Of course, Carnelian knew that. She was a cunning and vicious bitch, but she was not stupid in the slightest. Otherwise she would have mass produced her products for the masses.

So, she did the next best thing. The faulty “completed but ever improving” product was sold to her clients, and the experimental “true” finished products were tested out on the druggies and those desperate to try anything to increase their odds of getting pregnant on a budget that didn’t involve getting frequently gangbanged into oblivion. If the former complained of any side effects, she could point out that they probably weren’t following the instructions to the letter. And if the latter complained, they could be written off as addicts and swept under the rug. Or they’d be found overdosed sometime later and rendered insane monsters that had to be put down.

“Whatever she’s been pumping out for the past five years is nothing but bad stuff that’ll do bad things to you, m’kay?” He drawled and took on an odd accent reminiscent of a certain guidance counselor from a certain crude M rated American cartoon. “You know, drugs? M’kay? You know the stories you tell kids to not do them, right? Drugs are baaad, m’kay? They can do all sorts of crazy things, m’kay? But the consequences are like, the opposite. Especially if you don’t follow the instructions. M’kay?”

The couple didn’t say anything as the reality of the situation finally began to sunk in, draining their faces of blood.

He started to sway left and right, clearly intoxicated. “I’ll keep it simple for you this time. Muscle enhancers lead to deterioration. Memory enhancements lead to addition and short term memory impairment. Viagra goes wrong, you can’t get hard without help anymore. Abuse a fertility drug and plow the field too hard and often…”

Barren wasteland.

“What Snowball peddled does work, but I stopped the original for a reason. It will increase the odds of pregnancy, but it was still too volatile and addictive to be made in bulk. It ups the odds of you getting pregnant, but it lowers the odds every time you overdose or do get lucky. It damages the magic in your reproductive organs if the balance is even slightly off. Take it recreationally...”

The silence between them was damning.

“Like I said. I don’t need my revenge as far as you two are concerned. You two did a wonderful job quite literally fucking your family line to death without my help.”

And now to taunt the starving and thirsty farmers with a glass of water.

A flicker of red taunted the Devils’ eyes, and for a moment they believed they were about to be murdered.

But the reality was far, far worse to digest.

Issei held up a vial of sky-blue fluid for all three of them to see.

“Six months.” He breathed out slowly. “We told you idiots that all we needed was six months. And yet, despite the fact that you idiots can live for thousands of years, multiples more than us meager humans, you let your impatience get the better of you and fucked everything up.”

Salaia’s eyes widened in a mix of awe and hope. “You mean, that’s…”

Another flash of red and the vial was gone. “Of no help to you now.”

“You said you destroyed the notes!” Alac hissed.

“We did. Everything handed over was all developed by Ars Nova. Not everything Nee-san and I did in our spare time afterwards. Or potentially destroyed before the order was made.” The boy turned to drown more of the alcohol provided by Grayfia. “My head’s a fucked-up place that nobody can make sense of. Who knows what could be in it? Nee-san’s pretty smart too you know. Once the deadline passed, our labs were shut down, and we were kicked out of pretty much everywhere, we didn’t have much else to do to kill time while you continued to fuck us over. We’re the types of eccentrics that had our own personal setups to work with in our spare time after all.”

With all the modifications he had made to his mind over the years enhancing his intelligence, memorizing the complicated notes, compounds, formulas, equations, and processes was one of the easiest hurdles he had to deal with at the time. Especially after spending so long working on them in the first place.

They had actually finished the final product right before he had gone well and truly insane at the end of the trials, but by then there was no real point in exposing the results of their work to the world. It would have just been stolen like everything else.

Now though… well, it’s not like anyone can manufacture and sell it immediately anyways even if he did hand it over. Not without the proper manufacturing process. The medical field was a bitch and a half to work with to get anything certified. Research and notes were needed to support its use. Issei’s word wouldn’t get anywhere, officially that is. He and Jasmine had been banned from practicing medicine in any official capacity. Permanently.

Anything they produced would be dismissed without a second thought.

“What do you want?” Salaia hissed, not bothering to hide her desperation with all her attention on the teen, no, on the recently stashed vial.

Issei scoffed. “You don’t think this will be of any use to you *now*, do you? You have a whole slew of other issues to deal with. If I were you, I’d try to look for an expert Devil gynecologist with a strong familiarity with Senjutsu and Ki to address that problem of yours. Good luck with that.”

It should be noted that Ki and Senjutsu users were particularly rare in the underworld. Especially after Kuroka became a stray.

And, as stated before, Issei was banned from practicing medicine. Something they were all aware of.

Pity.

“Well, I’ve said all I wanted to say. And stuff.” Issei grinned, still swaying a bit. “Enjoy your night. Oh and keep me being here a secret. I wanna surprise Bird Person. Come Gray-chan! Let us find more people assholes and things!”

Before the married couple could get another word in, Issei sauntered off, giving Grayfia only enough time to bow politely and apologize mechanically before following him.

She barely made it to his side before he snagged three more glasses of champaign and downed them like a fish, his cheerful expression already gone. “Are you all right?”

“If my blood, liver, and urine aren’t flammable by the end of the night I’m going to assume you’re giving me a placebo and hold you in contempt.” He muttered in a far less happy tone than before.

He hated being drunk. Not only because he had to constantly put himself under to counter his body literally burning through the effects of the alcohol in his system, but because he could feel when he was coming down in the worst possible way.

So long as he didn’t feel the eyes of every single person in the room on him in his near perpetual paranoia, he could manage.

Afterwards, even he didn’t know how bad it was going to get.

“I dare not risk tonight’s events more than I already have.” She politely denied his suspicions.

“Mmmm.” He swayed a bit, allowing himself to simply forget, everything. “… M’sorry for bringing up what happened.”

“It was necessary. And it wasn’t your fault.” Her eyes softened, knowing he was referring to the complications that came with Alicah.

There had been a scare at the five-month mark of her pregnancy, but that was just the first of several issues that came up. The drugs had worked, but there had been complications with Alicah’s growth in her development. Irregular heartbeats and magical signatures had caused havoc on both mother and daughter for a period. Even after her birth, Alicah needed special oversight to ensure that she survived infancy. The entire ordeal had wiped out everyone, but none more so than Issei.

After the first close call, the then boy had hovered over the expectant mother like an excitable pet and constantly tending to her as though he was the maid. In fact, after a while everyone had begun to joke that Alicah was Issei’s daughter instead of Sirzechs’, which turned more into a running gag than anything.

Even to this day, with his less-than-ideal relationship with the Maou, Issei still kept tabs on the growing girl indirectly to make sure she was still in ideal health.

That child, was one of the few things he had somehow managed to get right.

“Mmm.” He mumbled before grabbing another champaign. It went to show just how good Grayfia was at being a maid that she never seemed to run out of the stuff. “How much longer till Bird Person shows up? I can’ tell if I’m gonna get pissed off or piss myself if I have to stay in this damn place fur much longr.”

His words were beginning to slur together, partially due to his constant self-induced inebriation, and partially due to the stress. Jumping between being smashed and being lucid was maddening.

His entire time in the room had been like that. The Berith couple were the third group of former sponsors that he had found and chewed out that night. There were some left in the party from what he could vaguely recall, but he didn’t know if he’d be able to find and get to them in time.

A pity. He had been the one responsible for at least half of them being there. It had been one of his requests to Sirzechs to come to this shitshow after all.

Revealing his survival. Exposing Carnelian’s deception. Showing off the prize that could have made them rich and powerful had they been a bit more loyal and patient.

Sewing the seeds of discontent before anyone knew better.

Even Grayfia was stunned into silence the first time he took out the vial. Until that moment, only Issei, Jasmine, and Vali knew of the content’s existence.

The rumors would spread, spurred on along with the reveal he was alive. Questions would be asked. First among the nobility, the ones that know better, but soon it would get out among the populace. Discontent would rise. Evidence would “conveniently” reveal itself. And in the aftermath… well, that was up to the Maou to manage. Hopefully they wouldn’t screw up too badly this time.

Everyone had been so busy with the established game that they didn’t consider that one of the biggest pieces of them all would finally decide to start playing himself.

“Riser-sama’s announcement should be any moment now.” She advised, looked at a clock on the wall and comparing it to what the schedule said.

“Mmm. I guess I can just wait n… huh.”

Uh oh. She knew that “huh”. That was the sound he made whenever something caught his attention.

Before she could ask, or stop him from doing whatever it was that caught his sight, Issei was already gone, stumbling and forcing his way through the bulk of the crowd in the hall towards…

“Oh no.”

Before her mind could catch up to her, Issei had already pounced onto his victim, sloppily hanging one of his arms over her shoulder and grabbing her breast while the other held a fresh class of champaign.

“Bella-nee!”

Yuballuna, alongside Ravel, Mihae (Riser’s other Bishop), Ile and Nel (Riser’s chainsaw wielding pawns), and Kiba, all went stiff in shock and genuine surprise.

“Who on… what?” The Queen’s surprised and irritated snarl died instantly as the name of her assaulter and the familiar way she was being groped caught up to her. “That, you…”

There was a distinct difference between those that recognized Issei and those that didn’t however.

Ile, Nel and Mihae’s surprise devolved into indignation and anger.

Kiba, Yuballuna, and Ravel on the other hand all went ash white.

“Oh no.” Kiba all but whimpered, hoping that he was hallucinating this horrifying turn of events.

“What the? Who are you? Unhand Yuballuna-sama this instant!” Mihae balked at his horrifying behavior.

“Bella-nee! It’s you! It’s been so long!” Issei completely ignored the bishop, continuing to grope the stunned woman in front of everyone while rubbing his cheek against hers before seeing the familiar blonde girl in front of him. “Oh! Its Canary too! You’ve grown so much! How are you!? Are you still flying around and stuff?”

“… Issei?” Ravel was motionless as the world seemed to no longer exist to her. Tears were starting to well in her eyes at the unexpected reunion. “Issei? Is that, is that really you? You’re alive? But I thought that, everyone said that you were dead.”

“I wish I was! Ahaha!” His laugh was a boisterous yet hollow one. One that was completely not sane.

It was only at that point that those there noticed his horrifically out of place smile. Even those that never met him before could tell that it was horrifically off and not right.

“This can’t end well.” Kiba muttered under his breath before realizing something and turning to Ravel. “Wait, you know him?”

“Y-yes. How do you… oh no. Jasmine and Vali weren’t the ones that trained you for the rating game were they?” Ravel’s mind began running a hundred miles a minute.

“Nope. Twas I! Issei, person, thing. Oh and a Cougar. She was there too I guess.” Issei’s head tilted to the side, failing to come up with an impressive name for himself. “Though I didn’t know it was for you guys. I mean, teaching a group of their level to use Carousel against Bird Person is just kinda stupid, isn’t it? I mean, he’s the one we tested it on in the first place! That fight was totally rigged from the start. I mean, nobody knew what he could do, but everyone knew that I had done *something* with him to make him not totally suck.”

“What.” Kiba was getting even more confused. “You’re telling me you *know* Riser Phoenix?”

Ravel almost wanted to laugh. It really was Issei. No one else spoke about her brother like that so shamelessly.

“Yuballuna-sama, what’s going on?” Ile asked confused and irritated. “Who is this idiot groping you? Throw him off already.”

“Noooo. Not yet. I need to do a checkuuuup. It’s been so looong.” Issei moaned, further kneading the woman’s chest and rubbing his head against her neck like a cat.

“Angh. I-Issei. Not here.” Yuballuna barely managed to hold back a moan, much to the other’s shock. If there was any confusion whether or not this really was him, it was gone now. Nobody could grope like he could.

“Unhand her already you cretin!” Mihae reached out to grab his offending arm…

“No!” Ravel, Kiba, and Yuballuna all stopped her hand just before she made contact. Only they noticed Issei’s body stiffen slightly and his eyes dilate to pinpricks momentarily.

“What?” Mihae stammered as she was pulled back by her fellow Bishop.

“He doesn’t like being touched without warning.” Ravel grimaced, looking at Kiba to see that he was also aware of the situation. “He still reacts poorly I take it?”

Out of all of them, Kiba was the most surprised that Ravel and Yuballuna knew about Issei’s quirks. “He reacts to everything poorly. Touching him just makes it worse.”

That was putting it mildly. Yuballuna swallowed heavily. Out of everyone there, she was the most in danger seeing as she was in constant physical contact with the Sekiryuutei.

It was not a stretch of the truth to say that he could kill her in at least a dozen different ways in an instant without changing position right now.

“Ile. Nel. Mihae. I believe introductiooons are in order. Issei, I’m trying to speak.” The Queen tried to talk without moaning, a lost endeavor.

“Sorry.” He squeezed her chest again fondly. “Mmm. MOB factor of 8.4. You’ve changed your diet like I recommended I see. Very nice.”

“Issei, please.” She hissed.

“I’m going to get help.” Kiba started to step away slowly. “Issei, be less Issei until I get back.”

“What’s an Issei?” Issei blinked confused. If this were an anime, his face would be shaped like a potato resting on Yuballuna’s shoulder, with his eyes being tired lines and his mouth nothing more than a squiggle. “Sounds disappointing.”

“Wait, is this the same boy you mentioned earlier?” Mihae asked Ravel. “The savant? How is this fool intelligent in any possible way?”

“No way. This idiot’s supposed to be smart?” Nel balked at the idea.

“That’s usually how everyone tends to react to him at first.” Ravel laughed nervously, though never letting down her guard. She knew Issei well enough to tell he wasn’t as relaxed as he showed himself.

The fact that the hand grabbing onto the Queen’s chest was in actuality shaking and twitching was all she needed to know just how unsettled he really was.

Issei wasn’t groping as some sort of greeting or show of affection. He was doing it because he was liable to completely lose control over himself if he didn’t otherwise.

As far as he was concerned, Yuballuna’s breast was a literal lifeline. And the depressingly hilarious part was that the fact was perfectly in line with his personality even after all these years.

“Mmm. Bella-nee. It’s been so looong.” Issei smiled like a satisfied cat and began to rub his face into her cleavage, completely ignoring everyone there. “Last time I saw you and Canary was when you said you were going to help deal with Snowball’s bullshit. And then you went and… and… Zzzzz.”

It was at that point that the stress of the situation, his constant intoxication, and the contact with breasts all cumulated in Issei’s mind shutting down and causing him to finally succumb to his instincts and exhaustion and fall asleep on her chest.

“Did he, just fall asleep? Right there?” Ile gaped.

“He does that sometimes. Although I thought he would have stopped by now.” Ravel admitted, laughing with a slight blush and looking away.

“I’m sorry. I tried to stop him and…” Grayfia finally managed to push through the crowd by that point and saw their current situation. “I see you managed to stop him yourselves. Well done.”

“Why are you congratulating us?!” The Mihae balked.

“He was alive this entire time?!” Yuballuna hissed frantically while keeping her voice down so he wouldn’t wake up.

“Can we get rid of the perverted idiot now?” Ile frowned with her sister nodding in agreement.

“No. No, this is actually good. Keep him like that for now. He’ll stay quiet that way.” Grayfia sounded far too excited and happy with the current turn of events if her sparkling eyes was any indication. It was more emotion than she showed most people in general.

Her fellow Queen’s expression of horror convinced her otherwise.

“… Very well.” The maid coughed, slightly embarrassed. “Ahem. Is that Azazel with flowers?”

**“They must be for his grave.”** Issei’s head shot up at full attention.

“What?” The uninformed peerage members could only ask in bewilderment.

“Ahaha. Ah. I see that hasn’t changed either.” Ravel laughed with an almost jerking reaction.

“Oh. You’re still here.” He blinked, eyes blurred and not focusing on anything before dropping it on the Queen’s chest again. “Goodnight.”

“Issei, you need to stay awake.” The woman cut in.

“Don’t wanna. M’tired. Bella-nee. Oppai.” He argued like a child.

“Riser-sama’s almost here.” She argued.

“Ngh.” There was genuine irritation in that lone grunt. “Hurry the fuck up Bird Person. I wanna get out of this hell hole already… no pun intended.”

“You know nobody has cared about those poor jokes in over two centuries.” Yuballuna chided while trying to ignore her tender chest.

“Still sorry.”

“Speaking of which, Issei, why are you here?” Ravel asked warily.

“… Stuff.” He grumbled evading it without hesitation like he was avoiding eye contact. With an unsteady hand, he grabbed another glass of champaign from Grayfia’s tray and downed it.

And another.

And another.

“Is he serious? Downing more like that when he’s already drunk?” Ile gaped at his horrifying behavior.

“Buzz wears off fast. Not that anyone ever believes me ever.” He muttered between drinks. “The world is a fucking Jackson Pollock mural and I’m the guy tripping off on it. Wait is that corn?”

Ravel and Yuballuna glanced at one another at the comment, knowing exactly what he was talking about. Issei’s immune system was something they were very familiar with, and not for the best of reasons.

“So who are you seven again?” He blinked at the twins confused, so intoxicated that his eyes were practically swirls at this point. “… Gremlins. You’re gremlins right?”

“We’re twins!” Nel pouted.

“Right. Gremlins.” Issei hath spoken, thus it shall be. “Heheh. Are you a part of ORC too? Are you closer to a Troll or a Troglodyte?”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Mihae blinked in confusion along with everyone else.

“I believe he is speaking about Rias-sama’s club back at the school in the human world.” Grayfia elaborated. “It is what she used to be seen with her peerage in public.”

“Wait.” Ravel started slowly as pieces began to fall slowly in line. “Wait. I thought Issei just trained Gremory’s peerage.”

“Nope. Classmate. Kinda. It’s a stupid joke. Me being in High school of all places.” He slurred before looking at the twins. “… Since when were there seventeen of you?”

“Classmate?” Ravel went still. “Wait. Does that mean you were in Kuoh the entire time?”

“Yup. And everyone left me the alone. Watched loads of porn. Got things done. Was quiet. Couldn’t sleep. Voices…” He began to drift off into his own traumatized world until Yuballuna shook her shoulder to jolt him up again. “Zrk?! Huh? I’m up. Did I miss the moneyshot?”

“He was in Kuoh…” Ravel echoed as something clicked in her head. “Gremory got Kuoh, and then… oh no.”

“Ravel?” Yuballuna didn’t like the way the girl went stock still.

“She figured it out. Canary always was smarter than everyone gave credit.” Issei chuckled with a hint of malice and genuine annoyance.

“What’s going on?” Nel asked.

“I have to stop this. I have to warn brother before it’s too late.” Ravel began to panic and stepped away from the group, her eyes never straying from the unexpected guest. “Issei, I… there’s so much I want to say but it will have to be later. Yuballuna, please try to keep him calm. If I hurry we might be able to stop a disaster.”

She would not recognize the irony of what she just said until days later.

“I thought I already was one.” Issei blinked confused.

“You are.” Mihae deadpanned, though concerned why her fellow bishop was freaking out and running away from them as fast as possible.

“Oh. Okay then.” He blinked again before looking at the twins. “… Seriously what the hell are you supposed to be and how are you reproducing so quickly? Eighty seven is too much. Curb your propagation. Did someone spill water on you gremlins or feed you after midnight? What time is it?”

“We’re not Gremlins! We’re twins and you’re drunk!” Both Nel and Ile shouted at him.

“…How about we both agree that we’re both right?” He tried to negotiate. Poorly. “Why are you here anyway? Are you help, or entertainment or what?”

It was always the smallest and most inconsequential things that tended to throw the biggest wrenches in anyone’s plans. Combined with the right timing, a butterfly’s flap of wings could eventually create a hurricane in an extreme case.

Or, if Fate was being particularly cruel at the time, the cause, effects, and results of certain actions could be more, immediate.

“We’re not his help.” Mihae stood firmly and proudly.

“Yeah. We’re Riser-sama’s peerage.” Ile huffed.

What Nel thought she was doing was driving the point home when she added her own two cents to the matter.

“His Harem.”

What she did, was set off an avalanche with a single word.

*An eye opened.*

Issei’s body went rigid instantly and his gaze became bloodshot.

That word.

*The beast remembered it was STARVING…*

“Shit.” Grayfia went to move to try and do anything to try and appease the situation, but was distracted when the champaign glasses she was holding just a few inches from her head, along with very other piece of glassware around them exploded violently and simultaneously.

That one thing.

*… and became irritated.*

Not even half a second later, a massive plume of fire and a circle of red magic sparked off nearby at the podium in the hallway, allowing Riser and Rias to appear in front of everyone in their party attire.

The *only thing* that had ever truly mattered.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Riser welcomes you all to-”

“OI!! BIRD PERSON!! I HEARD YOU HAVE A H̶̟͔̩͐̓̎̄̅́̀̚Ạ̶̰̤̻̹̦̅̈̓͋͋̋̈̕R̷̛̛͍̻͇̘̯͖̹͖̳̭̟̱̟̜͚̯͖̎̈̓͗̃̊̏̄̆̓͘̕͠͝͝E̸̛̜̘̟̿̇̈̉͒M̶̛̞̣̪̺͓̔̈́͂̀̽?!”

They just had to remind him.

o. o. o.