

CHAPTER 30

The forest was silent.

Not silent in the natural sense, but unnaturally so—no insects, no rustling leaves, no distant wildlife. Just an empty stillness that pressed in from all sides, as if the world itself was holding its breath.

Rias stood at the centre of the ritual clearing, her gaze sweeping the treeline.

The barrier she had cast had long since fizzled out.

And yet... the battle had not resumed.

They remained locked in a tense stand-off with an enemy that might no longer even be there, waiting just beyond the edge of perception.

Asia rested against a nearby tree, propped gently upright. The newly reincarnated Devil slept peacefully, Kiba's jacket draped over her slight frame. Her chest rose and fell in short, steady breaths—the only sign that her reincarnation had been a success at all.

Kiba stood at her side, unmoving. Her silent protector.

If anything, despite the tension hanging in the air, he looked... undeniably pleased. He hadn't taken a single step away from her sleeping form since Rias had brought the excommunicated nun into her service, watching over her like a devoted, guardian beast of legend.

A more apt description of Kiba, I do not think exists...

Under any other circumstances, Rias might have found it adorable.

'Safe to say they ran off...'

Rias turned her attention to Koneko.

The petite girl was stretching, moving through slow lunges and loose motions to keep her body ready. Like Kiba, she seemed unaffected by the atmosphere, but there was a coiled readiness to her posture—like a cat waiting to spring.

‘Should we head back?’ Koneko continued. ‘Create a portal, Rias.’

Rias bit her lip, weighing the option—despite wanting nothing more than to rush back to her manor, and back to her fiancé—but before she could respond, Kiba beat her to it.

‘The Church has long since developed countermeasures against teleportation,’ Kiba cut in, his tone calm but firm. ‘I don’t know if they apply to Rias’ new technique specifically, but it would be unwise to test that now.’

‘I agree,’ Rias said, displeased with the conclusion. ‘They already know far more about me than they should. It would be foolish to assume that knowledge is limited to my ritual alone... they may well have adapted their redirectors to my signature.’

‘So... what?’ Akeno asked, sounding equal parts bored and tense. ‘Do we simply wait here?’

‘We need to return to Issei,’ Kiba said, once again speaking before Rias could.

She didn’t miss it.

Kiba did not usually interrupt her like that—and the lack of formality when he referred to her fiancé sent a faint warmth through her chest despite the situation.

‘Akeno-san, please take Asia,’ he continued. ‘I’ll lead us back and clear the way should the need arise.’

Rias frowned. 'You think Issei is in danger?'

Kiba turned to her, his expression troubled.

'Issei is stronger than you give him credit for... but the balance of power here has shifted too heavily in our favour. If they're competent, they'll adjust their strategy.'

Rias felt unease tighten in the pits of her belly.

She disliked how easily she could see the logic in that.

It was the blanket problem—pull it up to cover your face, and your feet were left exposed.

It didn't help that she had been unable to contact Lucien for some time now. Or that Gasper wasn't answering his phone.

They're either busy, or...

No.

She cut the thought off before it could take shape.

When this was over, she would establish proper communication across her entire peerage—something akin to the link she shared with her automaton. It had never been necessary before, but tonight had made one thing abundantly clear.

The Church had studied her.

Adapted to her.

Exploited gaps she had not even realized existed.

It would *not* happen again.

Before Akeno could step forward, Rias moved first, bending to lift Asia into her arms. The girl was light—feeling little heavier than a bag of rice to her enhanced body—and Rias cradled her carefully against her chest.

Akeno was far more valuable in the skies.

And Rias did not require her hands to use her power.

Her wings unfurled behind her in a soft flare of energy, inky black edged with that distinctive crimson glow of her bloodline. The light cast by them painted the clearing in dark hues, stretching shadows unnaturally long.

‘Let’s move. We’ve wasted enough time.’

Her gaze shifted briefly to Akeno.

‘Ensure no humans intercept us. If the Exorcists attempt an ambush, I will not hold back.’

They all nodded without hesitation.

Kiba took the lead, moving ahead with quiet urgency, his senses better suited to detecting traps before they were sprung. Koneko fell in behind Rias, low to the ground, her posture relaxed but ready to explode into motion at a moment’s notice.

Akeno shimmered, her form dissolving into the night before a sharp displacement of air marked her ascent into the sky.

Rias adjusted her grip on Asia and followed.

Hold on, Issei... we're on our way.

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When Issei came to, it was with a mouth full of dirt.

He coughed, spitting grit from his tongue as he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, blinking against the lingering haze in his vision. For a moment, his thoughts stumbled over themselves, trying to catch up with reality.

Where the hell am I...?

His first instinct was the worst one—that he'd somehow fallen into the leyline nexus after forcing his core into existence—but that didn't feel right. The air wasn't saturated with raw Aether. There was no crushing pressure, no overwhelming current threatening to drag him under.

If anything... he felt *incredible*.

Not just good. Not just rejuvenated, but *better*. In *every* way.

Realisation hit him like a slap to the face.

Issei stilled, attention turning inward almost automatically as he focused on the sensation running through his body.

His Aether—no, that wasn't quite right anymore. His plan had worked. He could feel it, clear as day.

His *Essence*.

It flowed through him with a clarity his cultivation let him grasp instinctively, something deeper than surface sensation, something structural. If Aether had always felt loose and fluid, like water slipping through his fingers, and Cosmic Essence had been thicker, more deliberate and responsive—like honey—then *this* was something else entirely.

Something denser.

Something... *heavy*.

Like molasses running through his newly formed veins.

By all logic, that should have made it harder to control, harder to move—but it didn't. It felt smoother, more responsive, like the system had been rebuilt from the ground up to accommodate it. His heart—his *core*—pushed it through him with effortless strength, every pulse steady, controlled and absolute.

No lag.

No conversion.

No friction.

It all just... *worked*.

He shuddered despite himself, memory catching up with the new sensations coursing through his remade body—the way those pathways had burned as they'd carved themselves into him, searing through his insides as if a surgeon had drawn lines through him with a scalpel.

Yeah. Not doing that again anytime soon.

He'd become pretty *used* to pain at this point—or just pretty good at ignoring it.

That was *fun* pain though.

This? His core awakening had been anything *but* fun.

Though the end-result?

As much as he hated to admit it...

Totally worth it.

He exhaled slowly, trying to ground himself, trying not to think too hard about just how far off-script he'd gone.

Cores are supposed to be metaphysical until way later apparently... I just went ahead and made one physical from the start. That's... probably not ideal.

Then again, given how good he felt...

It was hard to argue with the results.

And the best part?

His essence responded instantly. No more screwing around converting Aether into something usable. The moment he reached for it, it was there—no delay, no resistance.

Honestly, it was easier than breathing.

The thought had barely settled when a sudden gust of wind slammed into him hard enough to make him stagger.

Issei blinked, boots scraping against loose stone for purchase as he fought to keep his footing. That... shouldn't have happened. With how his body felt right now, something like a gust of wind—even one atop this weird mountain—should have done little more than rustle his clothes.

Especially with how powerful his body was, or with how *heavy* he suddenly felt.

Another gust of weird, strange wind followed the first.

Stronger this time.

It nearly knocked him off balance.

'What the—'

He spun, arms flailing slightly as he tried to reorient, to regain his balance...and froze.

Because there was a face behind him.

A *massive* one.

Red scales, each the size of shields. A single eye large enough to swallow entire rooms. A snout that stretched beyond what he could take in all at once, filling his peripheral vision like a wall.

Issei's brain stalled for a second, trying—and failing—to process the sheer scale of what he was looking at.

Okay. Cool. That's a dragon.

A very, very *big* fucking dragon.

Colossal didn't even begin to cover it. This thing made his manor look like a dollhouse. Standing here, he felt smaller than he ever had in his life—less than an ant standing in front of something that could flatten mountains by accident.

He swallowed. Hard.

Ddraig...

He certainly fit the description.

And as much as he hated to admit it, he was starting to understand why the supernatural world would kiss the asses of such creatures.

Even if he was just an overgrown fucking lizard.

The great red dragon shifted, and the movement alone sent another heavy wave of air crashing into him, carrying weight with it—*real* weight, not just force. It pressed against him in a way that made his instincts flare, something deep and primal recognizing the scale of the thing in front of him.

Issei held his ground.

Barely.

A low rumble rolled through the space, deep enough that it seemed to vibrate through the stone beneath his feet.

'...Interesting.'

That wasn't what he'd expected.

No immediate hostility. No mocking commentary. No derisory tone like the Codex had been feeding him non-stop since he'd gotten dragged into all this.

Just... idle curiosity. Like a scientist looking at a specimen through a microscope.

Issei narrowed his eyes slightly, suspicion creeping in despite the situation.

'...You're way less of a dickhead in person.'

The words slipped out before he could stop them.

His mouth was bound to get him in trouble one of these days, but, thankfully, that would not be this day. Ddraig had the grace to not immediately *crunch* down on him for his cheek.

Probably doesn't want to floss pieces of human out from between his teeth...

There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

The dragon's head shifted slightly, and one massive, slitted green eye turned fully toward him, narrowing just a fraction as it focused.

And then it just... *stared*.

Issei felt his stomach drop, wondering if the great beast had a change of heart.

...Yeah, maybe don't mouth off to the mountain-sized dragon, dumbass!

His brain, ever helpful, supplied several extremely vivid ways this could end poorly for him. At his current size, he'd barely qualify as a snack.

More like a grain of rice.

A slightly crunchy one.

The silence stretched just long enough for that thought to become deeply, profoundly uncomfortable.

Then the dragon let out a low, rumbling snort.

Amusement.

Actual amusement.

‘Ah... I see now.’

The massive head tilted slightly, as though reassessing him.

‘The Codex.’

The word was spoken without weight, without importance.

‘You are one of *them*.’

Issei blinked.

That... wasn’t the reaction he’d been expecting.

‘I had been wondering how we were connected,’ the dragon continued, tone thoughtful rather than accusatory.

...*What?*

Issei frowned, confusion knitting his brow as he stared up at the colossal being.

‘Wait—hold on,’ he said, shaking his head slightly. ‘You’re telling me you *didn’t* immediately clock that I’ve got *your* Sacred Gear?’

The dragon regarded him in silence for a moment, and for the first time, Issei got the distinct impression that he was being evaluated.

Not as a threat.

Not as prey.

But as something new. Something *novel*.

‘In my defence,’ the dragon said at last, the faintest trace of dry amusement threading through the mountain-rumbling words, ‘I have not thought about that little bauble for quite some time.’

A brief pause followed.

‘A failed experiment I had long since disregarded.’

Another, longer this time.

‘Though... perhaps I was too hasty.’

Issei stared up at him.

...Failed experiment? A Sacred Gear?!

Yeah.

He had a feeling this conversation was about to get a whole lot more complicated.

‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done?’

The question should have sounded uncomfortably familiar.

When Rias asked him that, it usually meant he’d done something catastrophically stupid.

This didn’t carry that same reprimanding tone though. There was no irritation behind it, no expectation of failure—just a quiet, almost clinical curiosity that made Issei hesitate for a fraction of a second before answering.

‘...Uh. Vaguely?’ he admitted, scratching the back of his head. ‘To be honest, I was kinda winging it.’

The silence that followed wasn’t awkward or stifling, it was more measured. Almost accusatory in its incredulity and scrutiny.

That massive eye remained fixed on him, unblinking, and despite the sheer scale of the thing, Issei had the uncomfortable sense that he was being evaluated in a way that had nothing to do with him personally.

‘You... *winged* your core formation.’

There was no anger in the words. No mockery or incredulity. Just a flat repetition, as if the dragon were testing the words on his tongue.

‘Are you perhaps... an idiot?’

Whatever tension had been lingering in Issei's chest eased a little at that, more out of familiarity than comfort. The tone wasn't aggressive—if anything, it sounded like a scientist confronting an unexpected variable rather than any value judgement.

And then there was one other thing.

He still couldn't feel *anything* from the dragon.

No Aether. No presence. No pressure in the way he'd expect from something that large and powerful. That *significant*. Whatever *this* was, it wasn't the real Ddraig—not fully.

That made mouthing off feel... slightly less suicidal.

'Oi, from where I'm standing, it's all of *you* guys that are idiots,' he shot back. 'Why the hell should I waste time converting Aether into Essence every time I want to use magic?'

Another snort rolled through the space, heavier than before, the force of it pressing against him like a physical wave. This time, though, Issei reacted instinctively. His essence shifted, weight settling through his body and into the ground beneath him until he felt anchored, as though he'd fused himself with the mountain.

The dragon noticed.

'Did you consider simply not converting it at all?' it asked, tone unchanged—maybe a little amused. 'Aether can be shaped directly to achieve the desired outcome. With your level of control, it should have been trivial. Especially given the presence of the Violet Dragon's Body Cultivation within you that I sense.'

Issei opened his mouth to fire back, but his mouth snapped shut before he could make more of a fool of himself.

...*You can do that?*

That... hadn't even occurred to him.

Like... at all.

He blamed Rias for that.

She was proving to be a rather unreliable narrator, he'd come to realise.

He would have to give her a proper spanking later. As punishment.

It had nothing to do with his recent successes making him feel... kinda horny.

Nothing at all.

He coughed lightly, straightening up to cover his sheepishness.

'Right. Well... why generalise when I can specialise?' he said, doubling down. 'Better results that way.'

The dragon didn't respond immediately. Instead, it seemed to consider the statement, a low hum reverberating through the space as though it were processing the logic rather than dismissing it outright.

'...Indeed.'

Issei blinked, caught off guard.

He'd expected to get shot down again.

‘To achieve a domain at such an early stage—however incomplete—is noteworthy,’ the dragon continued, more to itself than to him. ‘The nature of the exotic Essence you have produced is, no doubt, a contributing factor.’

Issei frowned.

‘Cosmic Essence? How?’

The massive eye refocused on him, narrowing slightly.

‘Gravity Essence,’ he corrected, as though it were obvious. ‘You are unaware?’

Issei gaped up at the Dragon, momentarily rendered speechless.

Confusion filled him—wondering just what the hell the Dragon was on about—followed almost immediately by a rush of excitement that was very hard to suppress.

Cosmic Essence had already been *awesome*.

But *Gravity* Essence...?

He didn’t even know that was *possible*.

That explained why everything felt *different*...

‘What was your intent?’ the dragon asked suddenly, cutting cleanly through his thoughts. ‘At the moment of formation.’

Issei hesitated, then answered honestly, seeing no reason not to. Maybe the analytical Dragon would let slip some nuggets of wisdom he’d otherwise not have access to.

Because apparently his beautiful, brilliant fiancée wasn't as brilliant as he'd thought her to be.

And he'd not be letting her forget that any time soon...

'I was thinking of a star,' he said, plainly. 'I wanted my core to work like one—pull in Aether on its own, contain it with its own gravitational force, compress it, get stronger over time without me having to constantly mess with it.'

The dragon hummed again, softer this time.

'A coherent conceptual framework,' it said. 'Though your execution lacked precision.'

Issei frowned. 'Hey—'

'You were partially successful,' Ddraig continued, ignoring him completely. 'Your understanding of gravity—limited as it is—interacted with your intent in a manner that produced a more efficient outcome than you were consciously capable of designing.'

That... sounded like a compliment.

Sort of.

'Your core is excessively dense,' the dragon went on, its tone slipping further into detached analysis. 'The concentration of governing principles within it is sufficient to induce passive compression of incoming Aether, forcing a transition in its effective state.'

Issei tried to follow that.

He really did.

'...Fusion?' he offered, remembering how Stars actually worked and produced the energy of life.

'No.'

The response was immediate, but not mocking in its certainty either..

'Not in any literal sense. Aether possesses neither mass nor energy in the conventional understanding. The comparison is merely approximate. What you are observing is the result of sustained conceptual pressure altering behavioural properties.'

Issei stared.

He knew how stars worked on a surface level. It sounded like his core *kinda-sorta* worked in the same way now, using basic principals of Nuclear Fusion he'd been imagining when forming his core to base itself off.

He could feel it, even now, his core pulling in Aether and compressing it without any input from him, steadily building something denser, stronger, more efficient with every passing second.

He could also sense something else mixing with it. Too miniscule right now to single out easily. He'd have to look into it later.

Preferably when a mountain-sized dragon *wasn't* staring him down.

Still, he couldn't help but feel giddy.

I can't wait to rub this in Rias' face!

The dragon's gaze lingered on him for a moment longer, whatever interest it had shown already beginning to wane.

'Interesting,' it said again, quieter this time, as though the observations he'd made were being logged away in its mind for later examination. 'After so many iterations... one of you *finally* manages to prove my investment was somewhat worthy of my time...'

Issei's grin faded slightly.

Iterations...? None of the other Codex wielders were as badass as me...? Really?

He opened his mouth, questions already lining up, but the dragon was already dissolving, its massive form breaking apart into drifting motes of crimson light.

'Do continue,' the fading voice rumbled, distant now. 'I am curious to see how your continued disregard for standard conventions will inevitably blow up in your face.'

There was no malice in it. Just an observation, cold and certain.

'Hey, *wait*—!' Issei stepped forward, reaching out instinctively, but it was too late.

The last fragments of light scattered, and the space around him began to fracture, the ground beneath his feet giving way as the sky above split apart.

He awoke with a start, and he was once more in the abyss beneath his manor, floating within the stream of Aether from the Leyline Nexus below.

A part of him expected to struggle again, to feel his body overwhelmed as it greedily overdrank in the dense Aether flowing through the leyline, to feel that same pressure building until it threatened to tear him apart from the inside out.

Instead, when he looked within, Issei found the exact opposite.

His body *devoured* it. Not *easily*, but the strain was nowhere near what it had been earlier.

Though he could have, Issei didn't even feel the need to Promote again to handle the current.

Aether flowed into him in vast quantities, drawn in without resistance, only to be compressed and transformed almost immediately, folded into that thicker, heavier Essence that now circulated through him. He could feel it happening in real time, his core pulling, condensing, refining—each pulse making it denser, stronger, more... *his*.

Steadily.

Incredibly.

Just as he'd intended... *kinda*.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting himself sink into the sensation, enjoying the quiet of the hollowed-out tunnel. For the first time since everything had gone to shit, there was a moment of stillness. No pressure. No danger.

Just him... and the steady growth of his power.

And then he remembered.

We're under attack. The Church. Exorcists. The Ritual. Rias—

His eyes snapped open, twin pools of iridescent violet cutting through the dim light.

Issei pushed his senses outward.

The difference was immediate and obvious.

Sharper. Cleaner. Broader. Like the jump from standard to high definition.

He felt *everything* above him—the scattered bodies, the fading signatures of the dead, the living clustered together in tension. And beneath that, something else caught his attention.

Fragments.

Discarded pieces.

Lucien.

His lips curled.

These Church fucks were really starting to get on his nerves.

For the first time since waking, Issei reached for his power deliberately, drawing on the Gravity Essence now coursing through him—and nearly groaned at how *right* it felt. It surged through the pathways carved into his body, flowing like a current that had always been meant to exist, each circuit feeding back into his core, each pulse strengthening him further as he drew more and more Aether in from his surroundings and made that power permanently *his*.

His anger rose with it.

And with that anger came understanding as his will alone was causing distortions in reality around him.

This is what the lizard was talking about, I think...

His so-called *domain*.

His will pressed outward, and the world answered.

The massive slab of aetherglass above him—the same one he'd struggled to lift earlier with everything he had—shot upward without warning, as if gravity itself had simply... changed its mind.

He hadn't reversed it.

Hadn't consciously manipulated it.

It had just... happened.

The glass tore free and slammed into the ceiling with explosive force, embedding itself there as if it had always belonged.

Issei didn't spare it another thought.

It was time to greet his guests.

He rose.

Not by jumping, not by teleporting.

He simply *fell* upward.

The tunnel gave way to the main hall quickly, and the first thing he registered was the slab of aetherglass now pressed flush against the ceiling. Not stuck there, not wedged or forced... just resting, as though its sense of up and down had been quietly rewritten.

There was a smear of red across its surface.

Unfortunate.

Mostly for whoever had ended up there.

Issei levelled out in midair, gravity settling around him as naturally as breathing, leaving him suspended in the centre of the hall as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

His gaze dropped.

An older man stood below, blade raised and pointed directly at him, his stance firm and undaunted despite the carnage that surrounded him... and the very pissed-off devil levitating above him. Behind him, a young woman trembled, barely holding herself together.

All around them, he saw the pieces of Lucien that had been scattered around amongst the chopped up bodies of Exorcists.

Something ugly twisted in Issei's chest as he beheld the automaton's twin, blazing crimson eyes.

He didn't know *why* he felt protective over the annoying fuck, but the sheer thought that these *pieces of shit* had *dared* to come into *his* home and cause a ruckus...?

To say it *irked* would be an understatement.

'Yo, tin-can, go back to the mode you were in before.'

The crimson eyes immediately dimmed and the creepy mask split and folded away, replaced by the sharp, Gundam-looking one. Blue light blazed from the eyes and mouth holes and Issei smirked.

'You good?'

The response was immediate and refreshingly dry.

'I've been better... Master.'

Something in him recoiled at the deferential tone. He'd have to do something about that later... but first...

He turned back down to the man standing defiant below him.

‘Who the *fuck* are you?’ he snarled, his voice cutting through the hall as he glared down at his uninvited guests. ‘And what are you doing in *my* house?’

‘Know your place, Devil scum!’

The man’s response came without hesitation, as zealous and enraged as your stereotypical holy warrior.

Issei watched as the blade in his hand flared to life, golden light flooding it as something... *foreign* flowed through it. Not from the man himself—Issei could see that clearly now. The power didn’t originate from his core. It was being fed into him from somewhere... *else*.

Somewhere... *holy*.

The sword erupted with light.

A beam of searing energy tore toward him.

It felt so very familiar.

Akeno’s “training” had made sure of that.

Weak. And Slow.

Issei didn’t even need to think.

He moved his hand, almost lazily, and backhanded the attack away with contemptuous ease. The energy dispersed with barely a singe against the far wall, the impact doing little more than

ruffle his clothes despite the fact that, by all accounts, it should have been devastating to someone like him.

To a *Devil*.

Critical miss. Your holy bullshit was not super effective.

He'd be lying if he said the look on the man's face didn't *tickle*.

Shock, disbelief, and finally, a creeping edge of fear.

Was it strange that he felt that way? That he found this man's fear... *funny*?

Maybe.

But Issei wasn't the same person he'd been when that Fallen bitch had put a hole through his chest.

Not mentally, and now, not physically either.

As he drew more essence through his body, letting it circulate, letting it build, he felt something shift again—not within him this time, but around him.

The man stumbled, and caught himself before face-planting on the hard, stone floor.

The girl behind him wasn't as prepared and dropped to her knees entirely, a choked sound escaping her as the weight of his will settled in.

Issei tilted his head.

Huh.

This Domain stuff was kinda cool...

Shaking his head, he dismissed the useless thoughts. He had more important issues to deal with.

He had uninvited guests to deal with and an *unfortunate* mess to clean up.

And, preferably, he'd be finished with it all *before* the missus got home and chewed his ass out.