

CHAPTER 27

After Issei had given him enough justification to go to Asia, Kiba didn't waste any time. With a quiet, mental thanks to the newest member of their peerage—his new... *friend*—he rushed off with all haste.

Judging by what he'd seen on the map, he didn't have time to waste.

That didn't mean he couldn't buy Issei and Lucien some time on the way...

He didn't scout. He didn't *plan*. His intention was to create as much chaos and devastation in as little time as possible. In that regard, he angled his run towards the massive group of exorcists outside the manor and called on his Sacred Gear.

Normally, Kiba liked to think of himself as a scalpel. A terrifyingly precise implement, wielded by his King to excise problems before they became an issue.

A *scalpel* was the furthest thing from his mind when he called on his Sacred Gear.

For a fleeting moment, the image of what he wanted flowed through his mind like a breeze. Not quite a memory, nor a request either.

Just... a *feeling*.

High winds... Pressure building... Air thickening... The world, holding its breath before something broke.

Power. Fury. Devastation.

His Sacred Gear answered.

Warmth spread through him, familiar and immediate, settling into his core before rising—faster, heavier—until it pressed against his chest, demanding release.

Kiba didn't fight it.

He *shaped* it.

Guided it.

What formed in his hand wasn't like any other blade he'd conjured before, but something denser. Heavier. A construct that thrummed with barely-contained violence, arcs of electricity crawling across its surface like the power was barely being held back, looking for somewhere to go.

It wanted to be *unleashed*.

His Sacred Gear had pulled through. It was a sword in name only, though without an edge, he thought it was more apt to call it an estoc. There wasn't even a handguard, just a meter long, jagged *spike* that looked like a child's first attempt at blacksmithing...

And yet... the power flowing through the blade his Sword Birth had created was *terrifying*.

Kiba held on with all his might.

He needed to be precise to cause the most damage.

Timing was everything.

He normally avoided such overt displays of power, but right now, he *needed* to be flashy and bombastic. If for nothing else, then as a deterrent.

The longer the exorcists delayed out of fear or hesitation, the better for Rias, Issei, and Lucien.

Diving down the mountain, his devil wings granting him an even greater boost of speed, Kiba held his *blade* up and over his shoulder like Zeus, ready to bring down unholy judgement.

He was in, then out of the exorcist camp in less than a blink. Barely enough time for them to register his presence.

It was enough.

Kiba stopped holding back the energy of his blade and, as he passed overhead, launched it like a spear into the ground, sinking into the dirt up to the jewelled pommel.

He was so fast, he was over a kilometre away before the explosion of power was unleashed.

Kiba didn't stop to watch the devastation, but even at his ever-increasing distance, he heard the crack of lightning and felt the rolling thunder.

He'd unleashed a *calamity* on the exorcists—one that wouldn't end for some time—and while he didn't doubt many would survive the drive-by attack, it wasn't something they would recover from quickly.

And what better way to create chaos than to use a demonic lightning-rod to call a thunderstorm down on the heads of his enemies?

He just hoped it would be enough.

With a firming of his jaw, he put Rias, Issei, and the exorcists out of his mind.

The entire weight of his focus and resolve narrowed down to a single point.

On... *Asia*.

The woman he'd... come to care for.

Deeply.

The woman he... *loved*.

It wasn't something he'd planned. It had just... *happened*. Over the weeks they'd spent together hunting the Fallen, she'd grown on him in a way he'd initially tried to brush off. But Issei, in that very crude and shrewd way of his, had somehow seen right through the nonsense.

He'd called it what it was...

They'd come from similar places—different paths and different circumstances, to be sure—both used and abused by the Church, then discarded like trash.

After they no longer had any use for them, of course. Or when they were too broken and problematic to matter.

She *hadn't* broken though.

That was what had drawn him in first. Not her power or surprising skill, but her stubbornness, her insistence on doing what was right even when it made no sense... even when it hurt her to do so, even when no one would have blamed her for turning away.

She'd been kind too. To him... to *everyone*.

Without hesitation, without expectation... without even seeming to realise how rare that was.

Kiba had spent most of his life surrounded by people who *took*.

Asia *gave*.

Freely. Openly. As if she knew no other way.

He admired that more than he could properly put into words.

And then there were the smaller things... her smile—beautiful, soft and unguarded—the way she laughed like it surprised her every time. How easy she was to tease, how quickly she'd flush, flustered, trying and failing to hide it.

It had been... *easy* to be around her. Easy to *want* to be around her. Easy to *care*.

Care... for *her*.

Kiba's jaw tightened.

He hadn't protected her.

He set off like a comet, hoping he wasn't already too late.

At his unnatural speeds—boosted by his Evil Piece, his wings, and his Aether—it only took minutes before he reached the apartment she'd been staying in.

Asia had freely admitted to not having any money, but that hadn't stopped her from somehow securing lodgings in such a nice place.

Evidently, it wasn't only Kiba who had been taken by her innocent charm.

Asia was just... like that.

She had that effect on everyone around her.

Something in his chest tightened, but he ruthlessly quashed the feeling.

He didn't have time for that right now.

He came to a stop atop a nearby building, his stomach sinking at what he saw.

Two exorcists stood guard outside, doing a terrible job of trying to look inconspicuous.

A part of him wanted to charge through and be at Asia's side in the blink of an eye, but he couldn't risk her safety like that.

Not while her status was still unknown to him.

Swallowing down and suppressing the rage that threatened to spill out at the thought of these... *mongrels* harming a single beautiful, golden strand of hair on her head, Kiba squared his jaw and dropped onto her building.

Unlike the exorcists—so long as he didn't give them enough time to properly scrutinise him—Kiba passed as any other mundane human one could encounter on the street. A foreigner, for sure, but in a ritzy apartment complex like this...?

Foreigners were the *norm*, not the exception.

He cut through the smattering of sentries with comical ease, as if they were nothing more than chaff. The short sword he'd conjured and hidden along the inside of his forearm disintegrated the bodies before they even hit the ground, leaving no evidence of his passing.

Kiba *made sure* his targets had no time to scream or alert the others of his presence.

He was ruthlessly efficient, moving like a wraith through the levels. He didn't pause to negotiate. He didn't stop to show mercy—even if that's what Asia would have wanted.

These... *animals* had forfeited any right to mercy the second they chose to move against someone so pure and innocent.

Someone he *loved*.

When he gently—and almost politely—knocked on Asia's door, he was met by a violent, temperamental little brat that snarled at him the moment it opened.

Fallen.

She looked like a child and dressed like one too, but there was no hiding her *stench* from his nose.

He suspected the guise—if it even was that—had often worked in her favour in the past. Even the most hardened of psychopathic killers would hesitate, would pull their punches, at the sight of a child.

Kiba wasn't so naive.

His appearance—blonde hair, blue eyes, sharp jaw—fit right in with the other foreign exorcists, even if his uniform did not.

It was enough to make the child-like Fallen hesitate.

And hesitation... was *death*.

How ironic... her own tactic... thrown back in her face.

He drove the short sword right through her eye-socket, the conjured blade barely meeting resistance as it pierced bone and tore through her brain.

He felt no remorse, nor any satisfaction, with the ease of the kill.

She was just another obstacle.

It took a little longer than it had with the exorcists, but her body, too, disintegrated into nothing but ash.

And with one more target removed, Kiba was given a clear view into Asia's apartment.

Into the living room, where the furniture had been cleared away and a ritual circle carved into the polished floorboards.

A ritual circle where, at its centre, a cold, lifeless body lay.

Asia...

She was... so pale. So... serene. Even in death.

Even if he very much doubted her passing had been *peaceful* in the slightest.

His vision blurred, and Kiba tried to wipe the tear away, but his hand was shaking too violently to manage the simple task.

He'd... he'd *failed* her.

Asia was dead because he couldn't protect her... because he couldn't find the Fallen before they could do... *whatever this was* to her.

Questions like *why* or *how* felt immaterial in that moment.

Especially when he swept his gaze across the room at the sound of the bathroom door opening.

A woman stepped out.

Raven hair. Violet eyes. Buxom. *Beautiful*.

Fallen.

Another one.

And not just *any* Fallen.

This was the one who had killed Issei. He'd stared at her picture enough times over the past weeks to recognize her immediately.

She was the one they had been hunting, him and Asia...

The one who had not only eluded him, but had now come back to make him pay for his failure in the worst way possible.

Before she could even get a word out, Kiba was already beside her, his hand wrapped around her throat in a vice-like grip.

Her eyes went wide with shock and terror as she called on her wings, her magic—*anything* to help her escape.

But Kiba only squeezed harder.

As she struggled, clawing at his hand and conjuring light-spears to try and fend him off, he drove his knee into her gut, expelling what little breath remained in her lungs.

She went limp soon after.

Even *His* rebellious *children* needed to breathe.

As she collapsed to the floor, Kiba allowed himself a moment to steady his breathing, to regain his composure.

He'd almost lost control there for a moment.

That was... *unprofessional*.

Straightening his jacket and fixing his hair in a nearby mirror, he let out another deep breath before looking down at the prone body.

He had some... *questions* for this Fallen.

She was *long* overdue an... interrogation.

A dark part of him *hoped* she resisted.

But first...

He had to do right by Asia.

How do you know she wants this...?

He called upon Sword Birth once more and conjured a rather... unique kind of blade, turning the question over in his mind as he approached the woman's cold, lifeless form.

The truth was, he *didn't* know.

This was purely selfish.

Better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Especially in this instance—where Asia couldn't give her permission.

If she hated him after...? He'd just have to endure it.

The world was a worse place without Asia Argento in it.

Even as a Devil...

Standing over Asia's body, Kiba gently—almost reverently—pressed the blade into her stomach, where the core was metaphysically located for all cultivators.

Thankfully, the blade wasn't a physical construct, but metaphysical—just like the cultivation core—which made it ideal for its task. There was no slicing of flesh, no coagulated blood or torn muscle. It would pierce and anchor her soul to her body until he removed it.

And now... with Asia preserved, with a chance—however slim—that she could still be saved, should his King grant him this selfish request...

He slowly turned back to the Fallen.

To *Yuma*.

Taking one of the dining chairs, he dragged it across the floor and set it beside her unconscious form before going to find something to bind her with.

He had a lot he wanted to know.

And this Fallen *would* tell him.

One way or another.

What were they doing here?

Why *now*?

How did they find out about the Grand Ritual?

Why did they kill Asia?

What manner of ritual had they performed on her?

And, arguably more importantly... *who* was leading them?

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Once upon a time, Rias had watched a Rating Game between Sona and her ex-fiancé.

Or perhaps it would be more apt to say she'd been *subjected* to it.

They had been evenly matched—and given Sona recruited exclusively regular humans for her peerage, that was saying a great deal about her battlefield and strategic prowess—but the final bout had come down to Sona and Riser, each giving everything they had.

The last two combatants left in the arena.

Sona had far exceeded Riser in both skill and ability. That had been obvious from the outset, and even more so once they were forced into direct confrontation.

Unfortunately for Sona—and for Rias, who had been watching while grinding her molars into dust—her opponent possessed a legendary bloodline.

Riser's family had inherited the power of the Immortal Phoenix.

And while not *truly* immortal like the creatures of legend, given Sona's level of power, he might as well have been.

There could only be one winner.

No matter how many times Sona had seemingly defeated him, he would always come back.

He would *a/ways* regenerate.

Like a *cockroach*.

Rias had let Sona have it after the Rating Game, furious that she had lost to a man she so thoroughly despised.

Under different circumstances, Rias might have formed a bond of sympathetic understanding across time with her friend, especially given the equally cockroach-like opponent she now faced.

But the only way the Church could have discovered her Ritual was if Sona had let it slip to someone.

So she could be forgiven if sympathy was the *last* thing on her mind.

Fortunately, a stalemate suited Rias far more than it suited the exorcists. Despite his taunts, despite the endless stream of reinforcements that seemed to crawl out of the woodwork no matter how many they killed, and despite his constant boasts to the contrary, her opponent couldn't keep this up forever.

As much as it galled Rias to admit it... she was *protected*.

The longer this battle raged on, the more likely either Rias or Sona's older siblings—or one of their terrifying peerage members—would ascend and *deal* with the situation.

Permanently.

So the Church either had to win quickly, or retreat with their objective unfulfilled.

It was clear to Rias that their plan had been to either overwhelm her with their first salvo, or to force her to retreat to the manor and spring a trap with the amassing forces she'd been warned about.

Unfortunately, when Lucien had informed her of her fiancé's idiotic plan through their mental link, she had almost done exactly that.

Thankfully, her automaton butler had convinced her not to rush to Issei's aid—a surprise in and of itself.

It seemed Lucien was... *warming* to him.

A terrifying thought in and of itself.

Lucien didn't warm to *anyone*—though, she supposed she couldn't begrudge him his taste.

Now, free to focus entirely on the battle she, Akeno, and Koneko were embroiled in, they played a seemingly endless game of whack-an-exorcist. At the same time, her opponent had retreated into the forest, attempting to land surprise, devastating attacks on Akeno or Koneko from the shadows.

He had apparently given up targeting Rias directly, instead choosing to distract her by going after her peerage.

Distraction. Subterfuge. Hit-and-run tactics.

For an exorcist wielding such a powerful holy sword—and a Sacred Gear that seemed to grant him limitless regeneration—it was... rather pathetic.

She didn't know whether to be insulted or thankful that the Church had sent someone so... unremarkable.

Though she did not let her guard down.

Even an imp could fell a Satan, given the right opportunity.

Rias cast a veil over herself and slipped into the trees as the dynamics of the battle shifted, becoming something else entirely.

No longer was she the centre of attention. The exorcists had begun avoiding her, favouring Akeno and Koneko instead while desperately trying to keep out of her sights.

So... she adapted.

An ambush predator.

Now *she* was the imp, skulking in the shadows.

She culled small groups the moment they let their guard down, or interrupted the Holy Sword wielder's invisible strikes the instant he committed to them.

In that regard, the fight had become rather... boring.

Rias knew better than to indulge that thought.

Overconfidence was the true killer—on the battlefield, and in life.

She was so deep in the flow of battle, so focused on the Holy Sword user and the chaos unfolding around her, that she nearly lashed out when a hand suddenly clamped over her mouth from behind—firm, but careful.

‘It’s me.’

Rias stilled instantly.

Though she had fancied herself a supreme predator mere moments earlier, it was a humbling experience to have Kiba slip past her awareness so completely—even amidst a chaotic battlefield like this.

‘What are you doing here?’ she demanded quietly.

‘I have information. I know what’s going on... and I need a favour.’

With Kiba here—with someone even faster than the already blindingly quick Holy Sword user—the balance of the fight had shifted irreversibly.

Before she even turned to face him, Rias reached into her storage and produced a small metallic sphere, no larger than a baseball, and hurled it skyward.

For a brief moment, it flared like a miniature sun.

Then the light expanded.

A sphere of crimson radiance spread outward, swallowing the battlefield in seconds.

Akeno and Koneko didn't move.

They didn't need to.

The exorcists took their stillness for hesitation, or a sign the lightshow was merely theatre.

Unfortunately for them... It was neither.

Screams tore through the night as the expanding barrier burned through them, indiscriminate in its outward push save for Rias' allies, who stood untouched within its bounds.

A complex bit of artificing that, one she was immensely proud of.

The barrier wouldn't last long—and she had precious few of them—but judging by the urgency in Kiba's voice, this warranted it.

Only then did she turn.

Her expression didn't change.

Not when she saw him.

And not when she saw what he carried.

Or *who*.

The nun's body lay cradled in his arms, pale and still.

She's dead... How?

The first thought that rose to her lips was brutally pragmatic.

And what, exactly, do you expect me to do about this?

She swallowed it. Though Kiba hid it well, she could tell his nerves were wound painfully tight and didn't want to push him..

'I presume the Holy Sword user is proving... troublesome?'

Koneko and Akeno joined them a moment later, breathing slightly heavier, their expressions no less controlled as their eyes fell upon the body.

'You could say that,' Rias replied evenly.

Kiba stepped forward, not wasting a second.

He tried to mirror their composure, but Rias heard the barely hidden vulnerability beneath his stoicism—the slight hitch in his breath, the strain in his voice.

'The Fallen performed a ritual,' he said, forcing the words out cleanly. 'They removed her Sacred Gear and implanted it into the Holy Sword user. *Twilight Healing*, it's called... it supposedly doesn't heal so much as it restores the body back to a previous state of perfect health. It completely counters your Power of Destruction.'

Rias didn't react outwardly.

'I had already begun to suspect as much,' Rias replied dryly, keeping her voice even. 'This barrier will not hold indefinitely, Kiba. Continue.'

He nodded once, sharply. And thus began the quickest debriefing in history.

'They're not acting alone. There were four Fallen operating as a cell. Three are dead. One is in my custody.'

Rias' eyes narrowed slightly.

A cell?

Sent here? To sleepy old Kuoh?

An otherwise unremarkable town... save for two very specific anomalies.

Myself... and Sona.

'They were deployed here deliberately,' Kiba continued. 'They don't know who commands them. Orders are delivered weekly through burner phones, sent by post.'

Rias blinked once.

Burner phones...?

The absurdity of it almost broke through her composure.

'Their objective wasn't one of aggression,' he went on. 'They were told to be professional nuisances. Subversion and distraction, not open conflict.'

To what end...?

None of this aligned cleanly in her mind.

'The attack on Issei wasn't planned,' Kiba added, voice tightening just slightly. 'It was opportunistic. Very much against their MO, from everything I gathered.'

Rias felt heat rise in her chest at the detached way he phrased it, but quelled the rising anger quicker than it formed.

'The Fallen are working with elements of the Church,' he continued.

That much... I gathered.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the absurdity of it all, of being told that while they had this debriefing in a forest filled to the brim with the corpses of Exorcists.

But the *why* and *how* still eluded her. Though an uncomfortable suspicion was gnawing at her guts and she... very much didn't like where this was going.

Kiba hesitated—just for a fraction of a second—and Rias braced herself for some thoroughly unwelcome news.

'The Church itself isn't aware of this operation. There's a rogue faction acting independently... and coordinating with the Fallen.'

Silence fell.

The implications made her sick to her stomach.

Kuoh was currently housing *dozens* of exorcists, even some Templars and Paladins among their number.

Many of them... inexplicably *dead*.

In Kuoh. The domain of the younger siblings of two of the Underworld's ruling Satans.

Rias' expression hardened.

'Oh my...' Akeno whispered, violet eyes wide as the implications set in.

And the award for understatement of the century goes to...

The absolute last thing we need right now is added scrutiny. Not just from the Church, but from the Underworld too. We can't let anyone find out about the Spring...

Which would, of course, be exceedingly difficult given the political shitstorm and inquests this surprise, unsanctioned attack would trigger...

She exhaled slowly, calming herself and forcing the disparate pieces into place in her mind.

'Is that all,' she asked calmly, 'or do you have anything else to add?'

Kiba's jaw tightened.

His gaze didn't drop—but she felt it waver all the same.

Toward the body in his arms.

'If you want to neutralise the Holy Sword user...' he said quietly, 'you only need to reincarnate her. Once she's alive again, her Sacred Gear should return to her.'

'Idiot.'

Koneko's voice cut in sharply before she turned away, resuming her patrol along the barrier's edge, staring into the forest around her with sharp eyes and waiting for the moment the barrier dropped.

Akeno let out a soft, knowing giggle.

Rias understood Kiba's frustration immediately—the tightness in his posture, the way his control strained just slightly.

'Akeno,' Rias said mildly, 'go keep Koneko company.'

'Ara ara... how rude.'

But, with a final, knowing smile, she did as she was told and gave them some privacy.

And then there were two.

Rias stepped closer, her gaze locking onto Kiba's.

He held himself steady, composed.

But she saw through it. The hurt, the guilt, the vulnerability.

'No,' Rias answered without a hint of remorse. 'I don't think I'll waste a Piece for something like this. With you here, we can overwhelm the Paladin without wasting such a vital resource.'

She saw his body tremor in her periphery, the way the corners of his eyes tightened and his posture went rigid. She didn't look away however, nor did she back down.

He would have to do better than that.

Swallowing thickly, he continued. His voice was husky and surprisingly thick with grief he desperately tried to keep a handle on.

‘She’s... very powerful. I’ve never seen someone as skilled with *Sanguimancy* before. And you’ve already seen her Sacred Gear in action—a perfect combination that not only makes the biggest weakness of Blood Magic irrelevant, but its healing ability is on par with... with the greatest I’ve ever seen.’

It took everything for Rias not to smirk in Kiba’s face in that moment. Not only for how transparent he was to her—uncharacteristically so—but at him desperately trying to not bring up her *ex-fiancé* when referencing healers in an attempt to avoid triggering her.

‘That *does* sound mighty tempting,’ Rias allowed, making sure the greed shining in her eyes wasn’t terribly obvious. ‘But you know me better than that, Kiba. I’m not Sona. I’ve *never* reincarnated people because they’d be *useful* or *beneficial* to me—I don’t intend to start now, no matter how tempting.’

The words hit him like a body-blow.

But he wouldn’t have been her Knight if he folded so easily.

‘...*please*,’ he begged, quietly. Desperately. ‘I... I can’t lose her. Not after—Not when—’

Rias stood silent, waiting patiently for Kiba to get the words out. She watched, her heart shattering into a million pieces as he looked down at Asia’s peaceful, resting face with such affection and grief that it looked foreign on his normally stoic features.

It made Rias want to capture every remaining Exorcist and make them *pay* for making him feel this way.

‘I... I *love* her. *Please*...’

Rias’ stony facade instantly crumbled at the heartfelt confession and she favoured her Knight with an understanding, proud smile.

Reaching out, she gently wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and pulled the taller man down, placing a tender kiss on his forehead.

'I know,' she answered, her eyes shining at seeing how much Kiba was struggling with his emotions. 'Was that so hard...?'

Kiba let out a brief, watery bark of laughter, his body trembling as he furiously tried to suppress his emotions.

'You and Issei need to stay out of my business...'

This time, the small smile bloomed wide.

Issei had been busting his balls about this too?

Such a good boy... I'll need to reward him later...

Her smile dimmed.

If the idiot doesn't get himself killed...

Rias let the moment linger for only a second before stepping back, her expression settling into something composed once more.

Without another word, she reached into her dimensional storage and withdrew a small, ornate box. It opened with a soft click, revealing the remaining pieces nestled within velvet.

Two Bishops.

And one... irregular Knight.

Her gaze lingered on them briefly before she looked up, catching the sharp intake of breath from Kiba. A small, knowing smile curved her lips.

'Set her down.'

He obeyed immediately, lowering Asia's body with a care that bordered on reverence.

Rias' attention returned to the pieces as her thoughts turned inward. Despite what she'd said—despite her insistence that she didn't reincarnate for utility—Asia Argento was undeniably a *powerful* existence.

Her Sacred Gear alone was absurd—as she could attest—and if Kiba was to be believed, her magic was no less impressive.

She'd seen it often enough to recognise the pattern. The greatest weakness of a mage—especially young ones—was their fragility. *Speed*. Close that gap, and even the most powerful caster could be rendered ineffective.

Her eyes flicked, briefly, to the irregular Knight piece.

It was an elegant solution. A healer who could outrun death itself, who could cross a battlefield in an instant and restore her peerage not just to fighting condition, but to *perfection*. The thought was... tempting.

And—curse her romantic inclinations—but the image of her two Knights fighting side-by-side, destined to be enemies, but lovers despite it all...?

She had to resist the girlish giggle.

Her gaze lifted, one brow arching faintly as she took in Kiba's rigid posture, the barely restrained tremor in his frame.

'Relax, *Romeo*,' she teased lightly. 'I said I'd do it. I'm just deciding which Piece suits her best.'

She hadn't expected him to speak over her.

'What... what if she hates me?'

Ah. That...

Rias let the question percolate before answering immediately—she owed him her full consideration, after all—her tone much softer this time.

'I can't claim to know her as well as you do, Kiba, but from what I've seen... she doesn't strike me as someone who would hold onto a grudge like that.' Her lips curved slightly. 'She seemed rather devoted to her mission. I imagine she'll be more concerned with continuing it than anything else.'

She paused, then added more lightly 'And if not... you're a big boy. I'm sure you'll manage.'

The unimpressed look he gave her was immediate, and Rias answered it with a small, cheeky smile before turning back to her pieces.

As appealing as the idea of a speed-enhanced healer was, it wasn't the most efficient path. A healer's true limitation was never *positioning*.

It was *capacity*.

Resources.

Even the most skilled healer would eventually run dry.

She'd seen it countless times.

Even now, the Holy Sword wielder's regeneration had seemed effortless, but that was only because the damage remained within a manageable threshold. That would not always be the case.

A healer who never ran out... Or one with more *juice*...?

That was far more valuable.

And as for a mage's supposed weakness? Both Akeno and Issei had already shown how one could work around such limitations, in their own ways.

One didn't need to outrun a speedy attacker to win, after all. One simply needed to control the battlefield.

Few did that better than a *Sanguimancer* unconcerned with the cost of their spells.

Her decision settled.

Rias picked up one of the Bishop pieces and looked back up at Kiba.

'Remove the blade.'

He moved without hesitation, dropping to one knee as he carefully withdrew the metaphysical construct from Asia's body. There was no resistance, no tearing of flesh, only the faint shift of something deeper as the anchoring effect unraveled.

Rias felt it as it happened, the nature of the construct brushing against her senses.

Binding. Anchoring...

She presumed Kiba had conjured a blade that would anchor Asia's soul to her body and stop it from moving on to the afterlife.

Curious.

It was humbling, in a way. Proof that she *didn't* know everything.

She remembered it like it was yesterday, telling Issei how she knew of no magic that let the living interact and manipulate souls.

She still had a lot of learning to do, it seemed...

Though, in her defence, she probably should have clarified that she knew of no way for someone to interact with the souls of *living* beings...

Necromancers were very real, after all...

Shaking her head to clear it of distracting thoughts, she went back to examining Asia.

The moment the blade left her, something changed.

Subtle, but unmistakable.

Rias pressed the Bishop against Asia's chest.

At first, nothing happened. Then a soft crimson light began to spread, seeping through her body like warmth returning after a long, unnatural cold. The piece dissolved as the power took hold, and Asia's form responded in kind, the process unfolding steadily under Rias' watchful gaze.

However... the light started to recede before the ritual had been completed.

She reached for the second Bishop without hesitation.

Kiba's breath caught behind her.

This was always the risk with Sacred Gear wielders.

She didn't look back or question it, nor did she bemoan the unexpected loss of resources. She simply placed the second piece against Asia's body, her expression sharpening slightly as the reaction intensified.

This time, the energy surged across her body blindingly, doubling in force as it flooded through her. The light grew brighter, more violent, forcing flesh and soul back into alignment as if correcting something that had been forcibly undone.

Rias' brows lifted a fraction and she let out a sigh of relief.

Even with two bishops, when it came to powerful Sacred Gears, one always ran the risk of even *that* not being enough.

Thankfully, as both bishops dissolved into her body, Rias allowed herself a satisfied smile as the reincarnation process took hold.

Then Asia drew in a sharp, ragged breath.

Somewhere in the forest, a scream tore through the night—raw, furious and full of disbelief—just as golden light bled from Asia's chest, something unseen snapping taut before tearing free and rushing back to where it belonged.

'Thank you...'