

CHAPTER 28

Issei sucked in a deep breath as he once more beheld the aftermath of the chaotic battle in the main hall.

It was a painful reminder of just how absurdly real all of this was.

His new life—despite starting on such a violent note—had always felt a little surreal. Like it was all just fun and games.

That illusion had been helped along nicely by his video game-like Sacred Gear.

The body of his first kill was still just... laying there...

Yeah. That shattered it.

There hadn't been time to clean anything up. Her blood was still soaking into the stone, dark and stubborn, while the two halves of her body had turned an unnatural shade of *pale*...

He might've been concerned about staining, but... well.

Magic.

'We're here. Now what?'

Issei snapped out of his thoughts at Lucien's impatient tone. He was less outright rude in this "mode," sure, but whatever shift had happened to his personality hadn't exactly cured his impatience.

Right... let's do this.

Shaking his head, Issei looked down at the purchase he'd made on their way here—something that had burned through most of his remaining points.

Draconic Codex Ascension Point Shop
Level 2

Draconic Relic Exchange
Shard of Singularity

Classification: Exotic Material

Cost: 30000 AP

A fragment of matter recovered from beyond a black hole's event horizon, compressed to impossible density and steeped in the concept of Gravity. Its continued existence defies conventional causality, suggesting prolonged exposure to extreme spacetime distortion. The shard exerts a passive gravitational influence on its surroundings and serves as an ideal anchor for techniques involving mass, pressure, or spatial control.

He didn't like the feeling of being this poor again, not after how flush he'd been from their recent... "grinding."

They'd need to deal with that once all of this mess was dealt with.

He felt himself twitch despite himself, despite how completely inappropriate that was given the current situation. It was another distraction he couldn't really afford—not now, not when he was about to instigate the awakening of his core...

But Rias—even just the *thought* of her doing naughty things—could be *very* distracting.

Tamping down on his rampaging hormones, Issei acknowledged the innocuous jar in his Vault, hoping that it had all been worth it.

Because, when it came down to it, everything they'd done since his reincarnation had all been leading up to this moment. Rias had done everything in her power—sometimes with *great* pleasure—to give him all the advantages and leg-ups he could ever need.

Nepotism at its wonderful best.

And now it was up to Issei to take advantage of the opportunities he'd been gifted.

Despite what Rias thought, he wasn't completely winging this either. He'd read everything she'd given him about forming a core.

Several times.

It hadn't even been boring, which had been a surprise.

Honestly, it had felt like being info-dumped in some *xianxia* novel. A lot of meditating, pulling in Aether, condensing it... *yadda yadda yadda*.

He was glad that worked for everyone else.

For *him*?

Someone who *hated* inefficiency?

It was just ridiculous.

Why, if he only ever wanted to use Cosmic Essence, would he go out of his way to create a system that required him to constantly convert his power into it?

The answer?

He fucking *wouldn't*.

Of course, it wasn't that simple.

Cosmic Essence was a physical manifestation of Aether, shaped through intent and his will. It turned something fundamentally metaphysical into something... else.

Something tangible.

Which meant his *core* wouldn't be metaphysical either.

And yeah—did the thought of having a literal ball of power sitting somewhere near his guts scare the absolute shit out of him?

Obviously.

He wasn't *that* insane.

But if it meant never having to convert Aether again...?

He could just *feel* how broken that would be.

All the mental bandwidth he currently wasted on background conversion would be freed up for something else.

Like deleting bloatware off his OS.

It still baffled him that no one else had tried this.

A small, persistent part of his brain kept screaming that there was probably a *very good fucking reason* for that.

Of course, most people didn't have access to a completely busted Sacred Gear that let them buy equally busted artefacts to brute-force their way through problems.

So... there was that.

Issei let out another slow breath before turning to Lucien.

'Look, tin-can, I'm not exactly sure how this is gonna turn out, but I'm trusting you to have my back if those idiots outside decide to crash the party. You got me?'

Lucien's eyes flared a brighter blue. His angular, expressionless mask didn't move, but Issei got the distinct impression it was trying to convey something like determination.

'They will pose no greater risk to you than you do to yourself... Master.'

Issei shuddered. Literally. His whole body recoiled with revulsion.

'*Don't* do that. Go back to calling me meat bag, or fleshy, or whatever. That shit was weird...'

The next flicker of light somehow felt... *amused*.

How the hell do flashes of light look amused? Is this some fibre optic shit? Binary? And how the fuck am I even reading it?

He shook his head again.

Focus.

'Of course, you stupid meat bag. Now, what's the plan?'

Issei glared at him.

He said nothing about being called stupid.

...But considering what he was about to do?

Yeah. Fair enough.

Issei turned toward the large, glass-covered cavity in the floor—the one that led directly to the heart of the leyline nexus buried deep beneath the manor.

Rias had quite literally drilled into the earth to access it. Not for herself, exactly, but for the massive crystal suspended above them—the heart of the manor, and the anchor for everything built atop it.

And today...

Issei would be helping himself to that power.

Recklessly.

Enthusiastically.

Rias had even built him a proper cultivation room. One that siphoned off a controlled trickle of that immense stream of natural Aether.

That... wouldn't cut it.

Not for what he had planned.

‘We need to open that.’

Lucien’s head turned slowly to follow his gesture before snapping back to him.

‘*That* does not *open*.’

The quiet “fool” hadn’t been spoken aloud, but Issei heard it in the automaton’s tone.

Issei frowned. ‘The hell do you mean? It’s just glass. I’ll lift it if it doesn’t—’

Lucien didn’t sigh.

He somehow still managed to look like he wanted to.

‘That “glass” is a focusing iris carved from a single slab of refined, crystallised Aether, also known as *Aetherglass*,’ he said flatly. ‘It weighs more than a *hundred* of your oversized *swords*.’

Issei blinked owlishly... then looked back at the *not-glass*.

Five metres across. Thick enough to walk on.

Heavy, sure.

But *that* heavy?

And what the *hell* was crystallised Aether?

Could Aether actually be condensed like that...? Changed into something else?

...*Okay, that’s actually kind of sick.*

He could geek out about that later.

Right now, he needed that hole *open*.

The Shard of Singularity—still sealed inside its container—felt... wrong. Even through the barrier, he could sense the density packed into it. The *weight* of it. The way it seemed to press against reality itself.

If there was one thing he knew about black holes...

Nothing survived them.

For *that* thing to have?

It had to be heavy in a way his brain couldn't even process.

And if he was going to build his core around it...

He'd need all the help he could get.

He needed access to the nexus. And if Lucien couldn't help him with that...

He exhaled slowly, before sucking in a deep, controlled breath.

He hadn't used this part of his power yet.

But if he was going to be using it to help force his core into existence, there was no better time to test it.

Issei let out a slow breath, reaching inward, feeling for the Evil Pieces embedded within him.

Then, when he felt all eight of them—like an individual nexus of power he'd yet to call upon—he pushed.

Promote.

The response was immediate.

Unlike the other pieces, the Pawn didn't grant a permanent boost to his power. It didn't passively enhance him like Kiba's speed or Koneko's strength.

On its own? They... kinda did nothing.

Until you Promoted.

Then... it *borrowed*.

For a brief window, it let him tap into something greater—something far more intense than the boosts provided passively by the other pieces.

And with *eight* Pawns?

Several of them *mutated*?

The surge was... obscene.

Power flooded his body, sharpening his senses, amplifying his control. He seized onto it immediately, shifting the boost, aligning it with what he needed most.

Bishop.

He needed stronger magic. Better control.

The world seemed to narrow down to himself, and the aetherglass embedded in the floor.

And still...

Even with all this power at his fingertips...

It might not be enough.

Issei stepped up to the slab, planting his feet, bracing himself.

Then he lifted.

Or rather, he poured his magic into it, forcing gravity to release its hold on the obscenely heavy piece of *Aetherglass* so that it would *fall away*.

At first, nothing happened.

Then the floor trembled.

Dust began to dance. Tiny fragments skittered and jumped as the weight resisted him—not just physically, but conceptually. As if the world itself objected to what he was trying to do.

Issei pushed harder.

Muscles screamed. Veins stood out along his neck and temples, his face flushing red as he forced more power into the effort.

The slab shifted.

Barely.

Then more.

Slowly—agonisingly—it began to rise.

It didn't feel like lifting something.

It felt like forcing the *world* to move. As if he was pushing *it* down, rather than pulling the slab of magic glass *up*.

Like bracing his shoulders under something vast and immovable and demanding it yield, if only for a moment.

Like Atlas, straining beneath a weight that had no business being touched by mortal hands.

The opening was small.

Just enough.

Just barely enough.

Issei held it there, barely, every fibre of his being screaming under the strain, before turning his head toward Lucien, voice tight with effort.

Issei smirked when he caught what might have been surprise flicker across that blank mask.

Lucien was... a strange existence.

He still didn't fully understand what Rias had built, but if he had to guess, there were layers to him. Modes. Personalities. Directives she could swap out as needed.

He'd seen as such already.

The polite butler.

The protective sentinel.

There had to be something else.

Something far more suited for what was about to happen.

Not knowing if it would work, he just went for it.

'Lucien... activate... *kill mode*.'

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the light in Lucien's eyes shifted.

Blue... to violet... to a deep, hungry crimson.

His body trembled—not with instability, but with something that looked disturbingly close to anticipation.

The mask split apart with a sharp mechanical whirr, plates retracting and reforming into something else entirely.

His original mask had been creepy, sure, but in a banal, sterile way. The latest one he'd learned of, more strong and imposing..

This?

This looked like something straight out of a nightmare.

A jagged grin. Narrow slits for eyes. All of it bleeding that same ominous red light.

For a brief, very brief moment, Issei wondered if this had been a terrible idea.

Then he dropped through the opening.

The slab slammed shut above him so loudly and violently it almost shattered his bones through proximity.

And whatever poor bastards were waiting outside...

Well.

They would be greeted and taken care of by the manor's very *eager* servant.

That was the last thought Issei had before he was drowned in a sea of Aether, and it was all he could do to remain *conscious*.

He no longer concerned himself with what was happening above.

He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if he let his mind wander, if he lost focus, he'd be overwhelmed by the world's natural power before he could even begin with the *risky* part of his gambit...

This wasn't like when Akeno consumed him with her magic. To compare *that* to *this* was laughable. Even saying Akeno's magic was the equivalent to a nice dip in his new *onsen* didn't do the comparison justice.

And the sensation only grew more intense the longer he fell.

This...this hole is a lot deeper than I thought.

When Rias had said there was a leyline under her home in the mountains, he'd thought maybe fifty metres, tops...

He was pretty sure he'd reached terminal velocity a bit ago, and not only was he still falling after a minute, but the glow at the bottom of the hole was still growing more intense.

Issei wasn't sure how much more of this he could handle.

The hardest part hadn't even started yet, and he already felt like he was about to pop like a grape with all the Aether his body was passively absorbing.

He'd thought he'd drop all the way down—get right up close to the convergence, close enough to practically *swim* in rivers of Aether.

More than he'd ever need.

Yeah... no.

He'd underestimated the leyline.

Gritting his teeth as his body dragged in more and more Aether like a starving animal—he was quickly coming to find that too much of a good thing was a *real* issue—Issei forced himself to stop his descent.

This is enough... has to be. If it isn't, I'm already screwed.

Floating there in the dark, his body lit up in that weird, faint, violet glow, he pulled the jar out and just... stared at it for a second.

The light around him bent strangely through the glass—or whatever the hell it was made of—like it didn't quite agree with what was inside.

Don't bitch out now.

His hands were already shaking. Not nerves. Not *just* nerves.

It was just... too much. Too much power, too much strain, and he hadn't even started the *stupid* part of his plan yet.

He flicked the lid off with his thumb.

Then, as if he was downing a shot, swallowed the shard in a single gulp.

No buildup.

No ceremony.

Just...down the hatch.

For a second, nothing happened.

Then his instincts screamed at him to *move*.

He didn't question it.

Potions. Elixirs. *Everything*.

He ripped through them like a madman, barely tasting anything as he dumped every buff he'd stockpiled into his system. Strength, focus, endurance, control—it all hit at once, stacking up into something barely stable.

Something *far* beyond his normal limits.

His body protested immediately.

He ignored it and kept going.

At this point, he was past the point of no return. He'd skipped past that last save before the final boss without a care in the world.

If he fucked up now... he'd die.

Not only that...

His mind was assaulted with images of a singularity swallowing not only the manor, but the entire mountain too.

He didn't think about it. He *couldn't* think about it.

Every artefact, every enhancement he could trigger, he pulled on all of it, layering boost on top of boost until he felt like he was going to tear himself apart before the shard even got the chance to collapse reality in on itself.

Then... he felt it.

Something in him... shifted.

His body—especially flooded with Aether as it was right now—was *very* durable. Well past the limits most newly-born Devils ever saw.

At that point, with all the enhancements he'd just downed, even well beyond Rias.

The Shard didn't care.

At first, it was just a tug, low and deep in his guts.

That's not good...

Issei froze for half a heartbeat as something inside him shifted.

Then the pull got stronger as it steadily overpowered him. That inherent *resistance* he'd encountered when trying to use his powers on others?

It had been overcome in less than a second in his own body.

His stomach clenched as the sensation sharpened, not outward, but inward—like something inside him was trying to collapse everything toward a point that hadn't existed a second ago.

Oh, that's really not good...

The pressure spiked.

Fast.

Too fast.

Do something, retard!

Promote!

The surge hit him like a second heartbeat. He'd been worried it was too soon after his first dabbling with promotion.

Luckily, whatever nonsensical cooldown the creator of the Evil Pieces had built into the Pawn pieces had been generous...

Too lucky...

His control sharpened and body steadied. Everything that had been straining under the sudden load snapped into something tighter, more focused.

Just in time.

Because the pull spiked again.

His insides twisted, his body lagging half a step behind whatever was happening at a deeper level, and for a split second he could feel something giving—like his very *soul* was about to collapse in on itself under the crushing weight of Gravity.

Nope. Not happening.

Cosmic Essence flared.

He didn't shape or refine it.

He didn't have time for that.

Now was just time to make use of all that Aether around him.

He grabbed all he could and shoved it towards his guts, wrapping his power around the shard like he was trying to cage a rampaging, apoplectic Dragon.

The sensation of inevitable pulling barely slowed, but rather than pulling at his insides, at his body, it started to pull at the shield of Cosmic Essence he'd surrounded it with.

Tighter and tighter.

The shard didn't stop.

Didn't even slow.

It just kept pulling, nonstop. Unbothered by everything Issei was throwing at it, swallowing it all greedily.

Issei clenched his jaw, pouring more power into the shell, thickening it, reinforcing it, forcing it to hold as that pull kept building, as if growing in power the more Issei tried to resist it.

His body didn't feel like it was being crushed anymore, but the sheer amount of Aether surging through him as he fed the barrier was steadily wearing him down.

And the situation *wasn't* stabilizing.

If anything, the pull only grew more intense. As if the shard hadn't even been fully in this reality until that very moment.

Issei didn't have time to think, he didn't have time to bemoan his arrogance and stupidity, he just kept feeding more and more Cosmic Essence towards the shard, pressing tighter and tighter in the hopes that he could overpower the exotic material.

In the hopes that he could cage the uncageable.

But as he diverted more and more Aether into that shell of Cosmic Essence, Issei was coming to a horrifying realisation.

It won't be enough.

He didn't have a unit of measurement to quantify how much Aether he was pouring into the shell containing the Shard, but even if he stayed in that hole for a *decade* and fed it *non-stop*... whatever number that turned out to be, would be a speck of *dust* when compared to *infinity*.

Even his fallback plan—falling deeper and closer to the Nexus—was pointless.

At this point, what would more Aether do other than delay the inevitable?

This... this isn't working...

He remembered what Kiba had told him. In what felt like *years* ago now.

'Don't panic. You panic, you die.'

So he didn't.

Even as something inside him threatened to suck him into a speck of dust, even as the pressure kept building in a way he couldn't outpace forever, Issei forced himself to remain calm.

There was no time to freak out.

But there wasn't time to sit there and think either.

He had to *move*.

To decide.

Because as bad as this was getting—as much as his body was starting to give, as much as the strain and the pull was starting to outpace the speed with which he could compress it and feed the shell containing it Aether...

He still didn't think he was *wrong*.

The idea?

It worked.

Issei grimaced as the pull grew stronger.

...It *should* work.

He was just... doing something wrong.

The shell he'd wrapped around the shard shuddered again, the pull inside him tightening, deeper now, more insistent. It wasn't trying to break out.

It was just... winning.

Not aggressively.

Just... inevitably.

Issei let out a strained breath, jaw tight as something inside him twisted again.

He couldn't overpower it.

He realised that now—perhaps too late.

It didn't matter how much Aether he dumped into it. Even if he dove into the Leyline Nexus, that would only buy him time.

Because even if he fed it all the Aether Earth had to offer... what was that when compared to *infinity*?

It didn't matter how many boosts he stacked beforehand either. He wasn't fighting an opponent, he was fighting a *concept*.

It didn't matter how hard he tried to hold it in place. It would always be... *more*.

Because that wasn't what it did.

Gravity.

It didn't fight.

It didn't push.

It didn't resist.

It just... pulled.

Constant. Absolute. Unavoidable.

Gravity didn't need to win.

Everything else just lost to it eventually.

And that was when it clicked and the metaphorical light-bulb went off.

I'm attacking the wrong thing...

It all suddenly became crystal clear.

Trying to contain the shard wasn't just a losing battle. It was the *wrong* battle.

It wasn't the shard that was the problem.

It was what the shard *represented*.

The pull inside him tightened again, sharper this time, dragging at something deeper than flesh, and instead of fighting it, Issei forced himself to focus on it.

Not resist.

But to *understand*.

The way it pulled.

The way everything seemed to agree with it.

There was no friction. No opposition.

The world didn't *argue* with gravity. It didn't *resist*.

It just... *obeyed*.

And here he was, trying to do the exact opposite.

Trying to brute force something that didn't even recognise *force* as a concept.

Rias is right... I'm so fucking retarded.

The thought was so clear, so obvious, he almost laughed.

He wasn't losing because he was too weak.

He was losing because he was playing by the *wrong rules*.

So he stopped.

Not completely—not enough to let the shard do whatever it wanted—but enough that he wasn't pouring everything into resisting it anymore.

Instead, he let his awareness sink inward, past the strain, past the pain, focusing on that point inside him where everything was being dragged toward.

The centre of his being that didn't exist.

Until now.

If everything's getting pulled there...

His breathing hitched as the idea took shape, rough and incomplete, but so inherently *right* he felt it in his *bones*.

Then that's the centre.

Not the shard.

Not really.

The shard was just... drawn to it.

But if there was going to be a centre...

If something inside him was going to dictate how everything else moved... how *reality itself* behaved around him...

Then it wasn't going to be some random piece of space junk that fell out of a black hole.

It's gonna be me!

The pull surged again, harder, like the shard objected to the very idea, and Issei bared his teeth as he felt the shell strain under the pressure.

'No,' he rasped, voice barely more than a breath. 'You're *my* bitch!'

His Cosmic Essence shifted.

Not outward.

Not defensive.

It tightened inward instead, compressing around that point, not trying to stop the pull, but defining it—giving it shape, direction, boundaries that weren't there before. It was all instinctual

at this point. Issei didn't think, he just *acted*, letting his subconscious mind—and perhaps something even greater—guide him.

The shard didn't stop.

The pull was still there—constant, infinite...

But it didn't feel like the dominant force anymore.

That... was Issei.

Or more specifically... his core.

Is there a difference...?

There wasn't time to answer that.

There wasn't time to think at all.

Because the moment that thought even formed, something inside him *snapped*.

And then the pain hit.

It didn't build, didn't creep in or give him even a second to brace. It was a moment of stillness where Issei had only a few nanoseconds to revel in his victory... then *pain*, the likes of which he'd never felt before. It hit him all at once and it was absolute, and inescapable.

Issei's mouth opened in a silent scream before the sound caught up a heartbeat later, raw and tearing its way out of his throat as his entire body seized. It felt like something inside him had ignited, not heat exactly, but something worse—like his insides were being rewritten in real time, burned away and replaced by something that didn't care what had been there before.

The core he'd forced into existence flared, and everything connected to it followed.

Veins—or something approximating them that Issei didn't have a name for—spread outward from that point like fractures through glass, branching and multiplying as they carved through him without hesitation.

The process had no regard for flesh, for bone, for anything that had existed before.

And Issei felt all of it—every inch, every path, every moment something inside him gave way to make room for whatever the hell was replacing it.

His back arched violently, muscles locking as his body spasmed in the endless flood of Aether, suspended there while something inside him burned its way out and through him.

'F-fuck—!'

The word broke apart halfway through, his voice shredding as another wave tore through him, deeper this time, sharper, like it wasn't just his body being torn apart but something beneath it—something that had never been meant to feel pain in the first place.

His awareness didn't dull.

If anything, it sharpened. He was made painfully aware of every little change happening to his body because it was all suffused with Aether and, even if he closed his eyes, he was as aware of it as he was the back of his hand.

One of his greatest strengths—his Draconic constitution—was now coming back to bite him in the ass.

Of course.

He couldn't just have an easy win, could he?

There was no escape from it, no slipping into shock, no merciful haze to take the edge off. He felt the exact instant something inside him stopped being what it was and became something else, over and over again, each change etched into him with perfect clarity.

He had no control over the process. No say in it at all.

It was all... terrifyingly *automatic*.

As if he'd just opened the doorway for the change, and the universe stepped in to take over and finish the job.

The pathways burned deeper, spreading through him like a second circulatory system, pulsing with something that wasn't blood, but wasn't strictly Aether either—something that was unmistakably *his*.

His screams didn't stop. They just dragged on, ragged and uneven as his body shook under the strain, instinct screaming at him to let go, to stop, to pass out and make it end.

Because that would make the pain stop.

And with his awareness gone, surely too, would be the pain.

All he'd have to do was—

No.

His jaw clenched hard enough his teeth creaked.

Not happening.

He'd come this far. He'd forced reality *itself* to bend to his whims, he wasn't going to let some *pain* take him out!

No matter how bad it got, he wouldn't tap out like a bitch!

So he held on.

Even as the burning spread.

Even as his body felt like it was being hollowed out and rebuilt from the inside.

Even as something deep within him pulsed rhythmically with the process as a deep well of power solidified.

When the torturous process seemingly ended, the pain didn't vanish... but it *did* shift. It no longer threatened to drive him mad, but still left behind a dull throbbing he felt throughout his being as the currents settled.

He was so caught up with the new sensations, he didn't even notice the fact he was no longer overwhelmed by the seemingly endless flow of Aether still surging through his remade body.

And then came the power.

Not the explosive surge he was used to, not the borrowed spike of *Promote*. This was different. More understated. Somehow... *heavier*. Or perhaps *denser* was a better description.

It didn't rush through him so much as exist within him, settled at that centre, stable and constant in a way nothing he'd ever felt before had been.

Like it belonged there.

Like it had always been there.

Issei sucked in a ragged breath, his body trembling as the last of the agony ebbed, leaving behind something he couldn't quite put into words. It felt familiar, but foreign at the same time. A quantitative leap, and yet somehow all-too similar...

His mind tried to follow it, to look inward, to understand what he'd just created... but he failed.

He'd been winging it, especially when his original plan failed so spectacularly.

But somehow... he'd succeeded regardless.

Even if it hadn't been the way he'd intended to.

He still felt the Shard of Singularity deep within him, within his *core*, but its pull was no-longer overwhelming. It didn't threaten to usurp his authority, or pull him into its mass.

But it *did* pull.

And he felt it, as the Aether was sucked in around him like fuel and used to repair his broken and battered body...

Then, suddenly, the exhaustion hit all at once. Not creeping in, not gradual, just suddenly there as if a switch had been flipped—overwhelming and absolute.

His control slipped. His body sagged.

And as his consciousness began to fade, the last thing he registered wasn't the pain or the power, but the quiet, almost ridiculous certainty that...

Yeah.

Rias was right.

That had probably been a really, *really* stupid idea.

And as it all faded to black, Issei floated there in the dark—suspended by his own magic—a stupidly proud and victorious grin on his bloodied features.