

CHAPTER 26

If Rias had known she'd be fighting for her life that evening, she would have dressed for the occasion.

As it stood, her tracksuit was barely clinging on by a thread, torn apart piece by piece by an opponent who seemed to take perverse delight in systematically exposing her body to his deranged, lustful gaze—each precise strike aiming to kill, and failing that, to distract.

The clearly insane fool had chosen the wrong target if he expected Rias to fold under such tactics.

Unfortunately, the fool was *fast*.

Almost faster than Kiba.

And his Holy Sword—whatever it was—only made things worse. Its myriad abilities kept her constantly adjusting, constantly reacting, denying her the breathing room she needed to support Akeno and Koneko with any real weight.

Thankfully, the Paladin—because what else could someone this powerful and this skilled be—was far less competent in wielding those abilities than he was with the blade itself.

The illusions he conjured were crude compared to the ones Akeno liked to toy with. His weapon shifting mid-combat was limited by his clear lack of proficiency outside a standard longsword. Even his invisibility, while troublesome, lacked the ability to truly threaten her on its own.

Individually, none of it would have been enough to push her like this.

But layered together... and backed by speed that bordered on absurd...

It was enough.

Tracking him directly was impossible. Not at this pace, and with her eyes failing her.

Thankfully, she didn't need her eyes to track the speedster.

His sword *burned*—that fact alone letting her know the Paladin wielded a Holy Sword of devastating power.

Even without contact, just by proximity alone, her skin prickled and seared, the sensation intensifying the closer he drew.

I could really do with Issei's cultivation right about now...

The feeling was like a warning. One, she suspected, he would have been able to suppress if he were more skilled.

Though troublesome, if he had been her only opponent, this would have been manageable.

He wasn't.

A couple dozen exorcists moved across the field in loose formation, each of them clearly trained to fight devils. They never allowed Koneko a clean charge, baiting her into overextending while layering attacks from range. Further back, snipers shifted constantly, forcing Akeno to stay mobile in the skies above, never letting her settle into a casting rhythm lest she be peppered by searing holy bullets.

While she wasn't as affected by the energy as Rias and Koneko were, she wasn't as immune as Issei either. A single hit would be enough to debilitate—perhaps worse if they got lucky.

Which meant Rias had to stay mobile too, her mind constantly working on overdrive in an attempt to control the battlefield.

She smirked, despite herself.

Just like a Rating Game...

She had to divide her attention if she wanted her side to not be overrun. They had the skill and power advantage, their enemy had numbers, and maximised those numbers with sound, targeted group tactics.

Even now, while dodging and avoiding strikes from her invisible opponent based on feeling alone, she disrupted a trap before Koneko triggered it with a precise beam of Destruction.

Then she forced a group of concealed snipers to reposition with another, before they could line up Akeno in their sights.

All while dodging and slipping away from her persistent gnat of an attacker with the grace of a figure skater.

'Am I boring you, sugartits?!'

The searing heat flared along her side as an invisible jab threatened to cut her top loose entirely.

Close.

Too close.

Though she toyed with the idea of letting it happen, if only to give her an opening to strike.

The *last* thing she needed was the blade of a Holy Sword through her *very* Unholy heart...

Or, if she dodged the worst, the distraction of her exposed breasts flopping all over the place while she bobbed and weaved, especially if her bra got destroyed along with her sweater.

Rias smirked, despite herself.

She could just imagine Issei going *Super Saiyan* if something *unfortunate* happened to said breasts...

Rias had only fractions of a second to both plan out her moves in advance then put them into motion. The exorcists were learning, tightening their coordination—timing their attacks so she couldn't protect herself and her peerage at the same time.

...Or so they thought.

She waited, right up until the last possible moment. Until the searing pain spiked, until the pain was so unbearable she could hardly think straight.

Then... she moved.

Her body flared, black-red light flaring from her skin like a warning beacon.

Her attacker would have barely had enough time to widen his invisible eyes before a ring of Destruction erupted outward in all directions, overpowering and erasing *everything* the thin, terrifying attack came into contact with.

Up until that point, she'd only been firing thin, controlled bursts. Still scary, but manageable.

This... was on an entirely different level. A wide area attack that was so fast, so *destructive*, that you either knew it was coming, were fast enough to get out of the way... or you died.

Koneko proved herself to be in the former camp by dropping instantly, before even the ring had been fired, flattening herself against the ground without hesitation.

The exorcists assaulting her?

The ones in range, the ones unlucky or slow enough to not get out of the way or dodged in time...?

They just *ceased to exist*.

Koneko wasn't the only one who acted in time with her attack. Bolts of black lightning speared down from the sky in perfect synchronisation, surrounding Rias like a protective cage.

The warning, searing pain vanished, her assailant needing to dodge both her bloodline and the follow-up lightning attack.

He reappeared just outside of the blast radius of her attack, no worse for wear, but with his invisibility having dropped.

Fast.

Too fast.

The mouthy Paladin smirked at whatever he saw in her eyes. Without a single thought given to the comrades he'd just lost, he slipped into an aggressive stance once more, ready to start his attack anew.

'I can do this all day, you filthy Devil *cunt!* How many of *those* you got left in you?!

He was about to launch himself at her once more, but before he could resume his attack, he had to jerk sideways as a boulder the size of a car tore through the space he'd been aiming for.

He jumped, his eyes wide, as the projectile only *just* missed turning him into pulp.

A mistake.

One she would make sure he paid for. *Dearly*.

Got you.

Akeno didn't hesitate. It was as if they were of one mind.

A lance of Destruction punched clean through his chest, his position midair making dodging, if not impossible, then extremely difficult at the speeds the battle was moving.

At the exact same moment a pillar of lightning descended from above, engulfing him entirely.

A love-tap, Issei would call it.

Agony, if she asked the screaming Paladin.

For a heartbeat, everything stilled.

Half the exorcists were gone, and the ones remaining were too wary to immediately resume the attack.

The Paladin?

Dead—undoubtedly—his smoking, burning, charred corpse falling to the ground as Akeno's lightning let up.

Or at least... he *should* have been.

For a breath, Rias allowed the tension to ease from her shoulders.

Then she saw the body.

He was healing.

Rapidly.

Nonsensically.

And as she watched him stand, the hole in his chest was already closing.

That *shouldn't have been possible*.

Her bloodline left nothing *to* heal.

Burned flesh reformed. Torn tissue rewove. In less than a blink, there was no sign of damage at all.

'That wasn't very nice, you filthy whores!'

Rias exhaled slowly through her nose, a headache starting to throb at her temples.

She... really wanted to soak in her new spring.

Behind her, Akeno and Koneko had already shifted back onto the defensive as the remaining exorcists got over their wariness at the sight of their leader's miraculous regeneration, and regrouped.

For a fraction of a second, the pressure eased as everything reset.

It was enough.

One of the exorcists broke formation—not to run, but to try and capitalize on the lull in the battle and catch Koneko unaware. Low and fast, he timed his movement perfectly to take advantage of the situation.

Koneko, still on high alert, instantly moved to meet him... and almost walked straight into the trap.

The ground beneath her feet lit up, a delayed seal flaring to life a heartbeat too late to notice, too early to avoid.

Rias didn't think.

A thin beam of Destruction lanced between Koneko's legs, erasing the sigil before it could fully form, continuing on to force the advancing exorcist to abort his strike or lose half his body.

Koneko didn't even flinch.

She adjusted mid-step, closed the distance, and drove her fist clean through the man's torso.

He didn't even have time to scream before he was reduced to a cloud of pink, gory mist.

Koneko might need the spring more than any of us at this point...

Rias exhaled softly through her nose, her gaze never leaving the battlefield as the remaining exorcists shifted once more, their numbers reduced.

Thankfully, the enemies her surprise attack had caught had *stayed* dead.

If all of them had that strange, overpowered healing ability... they might have actually been in trouble.

She mentally corrected herself.

That was *not* healing.

Her bloodline did not *wound*.

It *erased*.

When the Power of Destruction touched you, it left *nothing* to recover.

And yet, somehow, this annoying, crude, foul-mouthed exorcist had not only survived... he'd returned to the fight—completely unscathed.

Which meant this *wasn't* healing.

Not in any conventional sense.

Sacred Gear...?

It *had* to be.

She clicked her tongue in annoyance.

She'd been the beneficiary of a completely overpowered Sacred Gear lately. Karma, it seemed, was rearing its ugly head to show her the other side of that equation.

To be able to recover from her bloodline, this exorcist would either need to be able to reconstruct his body entirely... or have some kind time manipulation ability.

Both were... troubling.

Combine that with his speed, his Holy Sword, his complete lack of restraint, and skill with the blade?

Rias' lips pressed into a thin line.

How annoying...

She could only hope Issei was okay, and that he was safe with Lucien and Kiba...

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The manor was quiet.

Well... quieter.

There was still movement somewhere deeper in the building, the faint crackle and whirring of Rias' clockwork-like creations and architecture, as well as Kiba's *slightly* heavier beathing—but compared to the chaos from moments before, it felt... eerily silent.

Issei stood in the centre of the main hall, unmoving.

Bodies were scattered across the marble floor. Some twisted, others simply still, their weapons lying where they'd fallen. A dozen, maybe more.

Kiba was moving through them, checking pockets and storing weapons in a dimensional space, while Lucien stood guard, the normally sarcastic murder-bot uncharacteristically serious and on high alert.

He didn't look at them, though.

His gaze was fixed a few steps ahead.

As it had been since the Voidsteel Destroyer had *eviscerated* his assassin.

He was sure Rias would have chewed his ass out for not staying focused when danger was so near, but at least Kiba was letting him off.

If only for this one time.

She, whoever *she* was... hadn't fallen cleanly.

The Voidsteel Destroyer had shot through her body like it was little more resistant than a wet, paper bag—and what was left of her was in two uneven halves, separated by a dark smear across the polished floor.

His sword was still lodged halfway into the wall, the purplish-grey surface covered in his victim's blood.

His first kill.

Because he'd straight up *murdered* someone.

For a moment, his mind just... refused to engage with it properly.

It didn't feel *real*. Like he was looking at something he wasn't supposed to be seeing, something his brain kept trying to slide past without acknowledging.

Shouldn't I...?

He didn't quite have the stomach to finish the thought. Not because he was ashamed of what he'd done, but more out of fear for what the idea behind the thought *meant*.

If Rias... hadn't been entirely correct about his recent purchases from the Exchange changing him...

His hands tightened into fists at his sides, fingers flexing as if remembering the motion. The way he'd flung his arm. The simple application of will. The Voidsteel Destroyer... *flying*, like a *rocket*.

It had been... so easy.

One second, he was half-enraged, and half-terrified that he'd almost bitten-it again, and then... the person who'd made him feel that way...?

Gone.

Just like that.

With a simple flex of will—a panicked, reactive shove of his magic—his assailant was just... *dead*.

His stomach twisted.

And then his mind—completely unhelpfully—supplied him with the most irrational, retarded of thoughts imaginable.

...Am I going to get arrested for this?

The thought hit him so abruptly it almost knocked everything else aside.

Police. Sirens. Statements. Courtrooms. His parents crying as their son was carted away in chains...

He shook his head forcefully, trying to rid it of the stupid thoughts.

Besides, it'd been self-defence. He wouldn't get in trouble for this...

...Right?

Then again, it was hard to argue proportionality when his attacker was in *two fucking pieces*.

'Enough.'

Lucien's mechanical, suddenly stoic voice cut through his thoughts before he could spiral further into unhelpful territory.

Issei blinked, the world snapping back into place around him.

Right.

He had bigger things to worry about.

Exorcists.

And yet, weirdly, they didn't fill him with as much dread as the thought of the consequences for his actions did.

How does that make any fucking sense?!

His eyes dropped, just for a second, back to the body.

Then to the sword sticking out of the wall, halfway buried to the hilt.

He stepped forward before he could think better of it, and nearly slipped on the dead woman's entrails.

Shuddering, he put his hand on the handle of the Voidsteel Destroyer to steady and catch himself, before summoning it back into his Vault.

The gaping, ruinous hole he'd left in the wall of his home started to repair itself before his very eyes.

Very much *unlike* the ruined body at his feet.

He didn't look down again.

Or rather... he couldn't.

Not because he was ashamed... but because the insides of a human body really weren't pretty to look at... or *smell*.

The huge sword disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and before he could think more on it, Kiba decided to be the next to intrude on his thoughts.

His hand closed around Issei's bicep.

Firm and grounding.

It reminded him of the time, not that long ago, when they were just two bros shooting the shit in the *onsen*.

Was that really only half an hour ago...?

'Come,' he said quietly, already pulling him along. 'We don't have time.'

Issei let himself be moved this time, his feet following without argument, even as his mind lagged half a step behind.

Later.

He'd deal with all... *this* later.

Hopefully, by then, he'd have an answer as to why he didn't feel *anything* after killing another human being other than... a fear of the consequences and—perhaps more alarmingly—*vicious* satisfaction.

Lucien led them up through the manor to the War Room, with Kiba bringing up the rear. A part of him recognised the protective formation—a larger part was too distracted to give it more than the barest hint of attention.

Lucien's head was on a swivel.

Literally.

Its head spun unnaturally, his now glowing *blue* eyes scanning in all directions for threats like some kind of portable sentry tower.

Is he in some kind of... protective mode right now? Is that why the face changed? What's the original? Asshole Mode?

'They're regrouping...?'

'We will find out soon,' Lucien answered in an eerily dry and professional voice. Issei idly noting that it wasn't just his looks that changed with the "mode shift."

He'd have to ask Rias about it later.

And maybe suggest she keep the annoying fuck in *this* mode.

Kiba's prediction, for what it was, proved true enough. They made it to the War Room unaccosted.

Though Issei found it a little ridiculous that over a dozen of their number could be slaughtered so easily, and the assumption was that more would just throw themselves after them.

He was really starting to realise how cheaply the supernaturals of this new world he found himself in valued life.

Or maybe that was only the case because no one thought *they* would be the ones paying the piper...

He shouldn't have been surprised. Especially not given the brutal way he'd been introduced to this world.

Then again, though it hadn't been confirmed to him explicitly, he supposed if God was real, so was the afterlife...

Cool, cool, cool...

He was snapped out of his thoughts when grinding mechanisms signalled the activation of Rias' eerily and comically accurate map.

No matter how many times he saw it, and how often he'd seen it used for its intended purpose, he couldn't get the image of Rias hosting little D&D sessions in the War Room focused around Kuoh-related campaigns.

Issei shook his head to clear it of the scattered, unhelpful thoughts and watched, somewhat dispassionately, as the large circular table lowered, spun, and revealed the perfect replica of their sleepy town.

When he'd first seen it, the map had been covered in lights showing humans, devils, even yokai. The only gold they'd seen had belonged to Kiba's girl...

And now?

The map was *covered* in gold.

She really needs a way to monitor this all the time... though I guess that's what the Grand Ritual is for?

'They brought an army...'

There was so much gold on the map Issei couldn't count the individual lights, but if he had to guess...?

Hundreds.

That's a lot of bodies...

It didn't go unnoticed to him that Issei had just assumed they'd be *murdering* these invaders.

Or how weirdly okay he was with that knowledge.

Though there were gold speckles all over the map, the lights concentrated in three main areas. The largest—and the one that had Issei's guts clench with worry—was where he imagined Rias to be, right on the edge of the map where one of her ritual sites had been set up

The smallest cluster of golden light was in the mountains on the opposite end of Kuoh where, judging from everything he'd heard that night, he could only assume Sona's own manor was located.

And finally, there was a steadily growing mass just outside this very manor.

'They're prepping for an assault,' Kiba pointed out, his voice grim.

A part of Lucien's spunk returned with his reply.

'Pigs to the slaughter. I activated the defences as soon as we entered this room.'

Defences that run on magic. Magic that can be disrupted.

Shit, if I could do it, why assume no one else can?

Issei didn't voice the thought, not wanting to sound ignorant or stupid. The other two were the experienced ones here. They didn't need him piping up unhelpfully.

His eyes narrowed as he shook his head clear and noticed something... *strange* about the map.

'What's so important about... *here*?'

Issei crossed the room and pointed to a particular spot. Unlike the three main concentrations of gold denoting the Church's forces littering the map, this cluster was nowhere near as large. Converging on a small apartment complex, it was compact, but just as bright.

And, if he squinted just right, he thought he saw a flicker of something *else* in the lights too. Something... off. Not gold. Not entirely.

Purple? Black? Wasn't that...?

Kiba froze when he saw where Issei was pointing.

'Asia...'

That snapped Issei out of the fugue he'd been drifting through since the earlier—shockingly brief—battle.

'Asia?' he asked, concern sharpening his voice. 'That where she's staying...?'

Then he remembered.

Asia. Kiba had said she'd been ex-communicated for some retarded reason.

Ex-communication, if he remembered, was like being banished.

Not a particularly pleasant experience, he imagined. Or one that left one on good terms with the ones doing the ex-communicating...

...Is she safe?

Judging by the way Kiba had gone stiff—his body trembling as it warred with itself—Issei guessed... probably not.

'Well?' Issei pressed, impatience creeping in.

Kiba's head snapped towards him, a snarl twisting his expression.

'*What*, Issei?'

'Don't growl at me, bitch. Your girl's in *trouble*. Go save her. The fuck are you still doing here?!'

Kiba trembled again.

‘I...’ He closed his eyes, as if in defeat, and let out a long, shuddering breath. ‘I can’t leave you undefended.’

That was almost enough to send Issei into a rage.

Enough.

He’d had *enough* of this shit.

Enough of people trying to kill him.

Enough of people babying him and trying to protect him.

Enough of feeling *weak*.

This time, Issei was the one letting out a deep, steady breath. When his eyes opened again, he found both Kiba and Lucien watching him with strange looks.

‘Either you go save her, or we go save her. Tell me, numb-nuts—will it be easier for Lucien to protect me *here*, or the both of you to protect me out *there*?’

‘What makes you think I’ll let you leave this—’

Issei learned in that very moment that whatever innate magical resistance other *living* beings had to his power directly affecting them *didn’t* apply to annoying, snarky, arrogant tin-cans built by his fiancée, as Lucien was slammed into the ground under the crushing weight of Issei’s fury.

Issei crouched beside him, all signs of humour gone from his face.

‘Talk back to me again, tin-can, and I’m gonna take you apart piece-by-piece and put you back together as a fucking *toilet*,’ he promised, coldly.

Issei had had about enough of being belittled and talked down to.

He figured it was about time he did something about that.

Starting with putting this piece of shit in his place.

'I'm marrying Rias. Get that through your head. You don't just answer to her—you answer to *us*. Got it?'

Lucien... might have nodded.

It was hard to tell when he was being compressed into something approximating one of those cubes the huge trash compactors would make at the tip.

Then again...

Was it weird that Issei somehow sensed approval in those twin pools of blue light?

Weird.

'Just *go*, Kiba. Don't worry about me. For what it's worth, I'm not just gonna be sitting here with my thumb up my ass either.'

He didn't elaborate. Issei didn't think he had the bandwidth in that moment to deal with *more* people trying to talk him out of his—admittedly—crazy plan for core formation.

He turned back to the map, noting that the exorcists were still gathering outside, waiting for... *something*.

Are they hoping to get rid of Rias first? Is that why they're waiting? Maybe they're laying a trap, expecting her to come running back...?

Either way, both possibilities only made him angrier.

A part of him wondered if his anger was entirely natural. If perhaps recent events had made him a little more... *volatile*.

The circumstances of his new life, fiddling with things in the Relix Exchange he didn't fully understand, his first kill... it could have been any or none of those things...

Something I'll have to think about. Later.

'I...' Kiba hesitated, his selfless devotion to Rias and his selfish desire to save his new girlfriend warring within him.

'Go! The fuck are you waiting for? I thought you *loved* her?!

Kiba started at Issei's expletives, but then his jaw set, his eyes narrowing. He took a long breath, then slowly nodded.

He didn't thank him. There wasn't time.

With his face set, he gave them both a final nod... and then, he was *gone*.

Not teleportation. He'd seen plenty of *that* lately to be able to recognize it instantly by feeling alone.

This was just raw, *terrifying* speed.

...that pretty-boy fuck was still holding back on me?!

A distant part of Issei's mind reminded him that *he* could have access to an even more potent amount of this Evil Piece-provided speed with his Pawn piece too, if only briefly...

Man, I really hate temporary power boosts I can't rely on though...

Especially ones he'd never practised with before.

Shaking his head to clear it of distracting thoughts, he let out a sigh

Issei released his magical grip on Lucien, on the rage that fuelled the spell, allowing the construct to rise and put himself back together as if nothing was wrong.

'Do what you've gotta do for Rias.'

'I've already informed the mistress of the situation,' Lucien replied. 'She... did not have kind words regarding your... *plan*.'

Issei snorted, the edge of his anger dulling as his lips curled in amusement.

Now that he had direction—now that he had something resembling control—the queasiness in his gut had dulled.

Rias was right to be worried. He *did* have a plan.

And if it worked... maybe, just maybe, he'd stop being treated like a fucking kid.

That wasn't to say he didn't understand the source for Rias' angst.

While he wasn't a child, when it came to his *Devil* life, he was still a baby.

A devil-baby.

And without the aid of a Sacred Gear, it usually took newborn devils months, if not *years* to get to the point where they could safely and effectively form their cores.

Their shitty, busted cores anyway...

Issei wouldn't settle for what was considered *standard* however. Call him arrogant—and given he was spitting at millenia of shared wisdom in the face, he totally understood Rias' frustration—but the typical way Devil cultivators formed their Aether cores just felt... *wrong* to him.

He couldn't explain why. It just did. Maybe he had a unique perspective. Or maybe he was just a unique combination of stubborn and retarded, but he had a plan that just felt better. For *him*.

And what was one of the first things Rias taught him when it came to magic?

'...for Devils, magic follows the heart more than the mind. If you try to control it too rigidly, it will never truly be yours.'

Maybe that's why Rias is so pissy. I took her words and spun them in a way she didn't even remotely intend...

But how would he ever make his magic *his* if he just followed along with what everyone else had done—*wrongly*, in his opinion—to a subpar conclusion?

He wouldn't. And Issei believed that with all of his being.

He believed it so much, he was willing to put it all on the line. To push all his chips in and bet it all.

Just as a *Dragon* would...

Ironically, as hyper-sensitive as Issei was to the possibility of the Codex changing him in ways he couldn't foresee or comprehend, he completely missed perhaps this most crucial of signs supporting that fear.

'Alright tin-can,' Issei said, turning his intense gaze back onto his suddenly less bloodthirsty robo-butler, 'you ready? We're going back to the main hall. I'm gonna form my core.'

Lucien froze, his head tilting as he regarded him with curiosity.

Maybe Issei's words and show of force had finally *computed*, but the automaton didn't immediately object.

At least not directly.

'...and why do you need to be *there* to break through? This room is far more defensible.'

Issei paused at the door and turned, a wide, excited grin on his handsome features.

'Well, because that's where the opening to the Ley-Line Nexus is. *Obviously*. I'm gonna need a *lot* of Aether...'

'He's going to get himself killed...'

Issei turned and ignored Lucien's long-suffering sigh and his pessimistic words.

As they moved, Issei trusted the butler to watch his back as he scanned through the Relic Exchange for the artefact he'd been eyeing for ages.

The one that would make this crazy plan of his work.

Well... either that or he'd unleash a black hole powerful enough to not just swallow Rias' shiny manor, but the entire mountain it's sitting on too...

Man... she'd probably resurrect me again just to kill my dumb ass...

None of that mattered though.

Issei grinned, his smile showing way too many teeth.

Because he *wouldn't* fail.

I won't allow it.