

CHAPTER 25

Issei let out an almighty groan as he sank into the warm waters of the Purification Spring.

Whatever about its broken cleansing properties. If he kept training like this with Kiba, the thing would pay for itself just from soothing his aching muscles alone.

An amused snort sounded beside him.

He didn't bother opening his eyes. He couldn't, even if he tried. His eyelids felt like steel curtains.

'Shut up, *pretty-boy*.'

Another snort.

'I find it very amusing that you continue to comment on my appearance,' Kiba replied lightly, his mirth clear in his light, airy tone. 'I suppose I should be flattered.'

Issei groaned and slipped under the water to escape the infuriatingly polite ribbing.

Bro can't even talk shit properly...

Using his magic to sit crossed-legged on the stone base of the spring, Issei arched his back until he heard a series of satisfying cracks. A part of him wondered if the spring treated muscle soreness as another contaminant that needed to be purified.

That would be so fucking great...

He let out a bubbly sigh as he replayed the events of their spar in his mind.

In his defence... he'd pushed Kiba far harder today.

He hadn't whipped out the Voidsteel Destroyer—Rias had been *very clear* about that—but he'd tried something different.

Before meeting up with Kiba in the training room, he'd flown through the forest grabbing every boulder he could find until his expanded vault was packed to bursting.

The logic was painfully simple. Years of binging *shonen* anime and critiquing stupid protagonists had given him a mind for such strategizing.

Kiba was fast.

Stupidly fast.

So fast he needed to rely on everything *but* his eyes to avoid getting curb-stomped.

That speed had proven slightly less unfair when Issei turned the training room into an asteroid field.

Not rings, like Saturn. A *sphere*.

Thank fuck I don't have to worry about everything spinning in the same direction, otherwise that trick would be useless...

Boulders orbiting him on all sides.

Not on a single plane.

All the planes.

Sure, Kiba had smashed through every one of them. But smashing rocks didn't vaporise them. It just broke them into *smaller* rocks.

Rocks Issei immediately added back into the rotation.

He'd never controlled that many objects at once before. But they weren't that heavy. And the command was relatively simple.

Orbit around me. I'm the centre of gravity. Spin faster!

It had been... manageable.

Attacking and defending at the same time was still rough. But he'd landed a few solid, satisfying backhands when Kiba overextended, or flinched and stuttered when he'd been jump-scared by a rock to the face.

Did he pay for it?

Yeah.

Did he currently feel like one giant bruise?

Also yeah.

But he'd given as good as he'd gotten.

And that *mattered*. At least for his ego.

He resurfaced with a slow breath.

The frustrating part?

He still couldn't properly affect Kiba directly with his magic.

He could manipulate a weapon that weighed nearly two tonnes. He could fly. He could create an asteroid field around him that disobeyed orbital mechanics

But when he tried to increase gravity on Kiba?

Nothing.

At best, he could change the direction gravity pulled him. That had worked precisely once...on Koneko. Kiba had been prepared for that trick and his one attempt at trying it had only resulted in the Knight attacking him from such a weird angle it did more harm to Issei than help.

His dreams of casually crushing opponents into the dirt with a thought would have to wait.

For now...

Still...

He knew how to attack. He had his defense down.

Gravity control. Orbital mechanics.

Combining the two can't be that hard...

It was just a matter of willpower and essence at this point. Not only did it feel like he was splitting his mind in too many directions when he tried, but his essence stores drained at prodigious rates when he did.

It certainly didn't help that he *still* had to convert his Aether to Cosmic Essence first.

Hopefully...not for long. Sorry babe.

Issei turned to Kiba. The dude's eyes were closed too.

A part of him couldn't help thinking that, as loyal as his fiancée's Knight was, the pretty-boy hadn't exactly lingered after training. He'd all but sprinted to the spring when Issei had called it quits, barely stopping long enough to strip before sinking in.

Issei watched the murky water around Kiba's body get sucked away for several silent moments before speaking.

'How's it feel?'

Somehow, Kiba intuited exactly what he meant.

'Like a weight is steadily being lifted off my shoulders,' he said softly. 'It's as if... I thought I could breathe fine my entire life, but the longer I spend in here, the more I realise I've been living with a constrictor slowly crushing my lungs every second of every day.'

Issei's eyes widened.

'It's *that* bad?'

Kiba nodded, eyes still closed, expression serene.

'You are my King's consort,' he said, continuing, 'so you already had my loyalty. But for *this*...?'

His eyes finally opened. He looked to the majestic marble dragon carving, then back to Issei with an ebullient smile.

‘For this, you have my undying gratitude.’

Issei’s cheeks flushed.

He’d never been good with this sappy shit.

‘Yeah, sure. I did it for Rias bro, don’t make it weird...’

Kiba only laughed at his lame mumbling and deflecting tactics.

They let the silence stretch, and Issei found himself surprised that he didn’t find it awkward. He idly wondered if Rias was done checking the sites she’d set up around Kuoh. She’d essentially turned the entire town into a ritual circle and, though her manor was at the centre at the convergence of the leylines, Rias had also needed to set up arcane ritual sites at the intersection of said leylines, and what would become the border of her domain.

She was understandably nervous. No one had tried a ritual like this for millennia. *No one* had ever done so in the human world. She had a lot riding on this ritual, and very little experience or wisdom to call on for help.

She’s got this.

Kiba apparently had more on his mind.

‘When Buchou spoke of your growth... your potential... I’m ashamed to admit I thought it the words of someone in love. Spoken through rose-tinted glasses.’

Issei shook his head, the non-sequitur throwing him for a loop. He turned to his peerage mate and regarded him with eyebrows raised in curiosity.

‘And you *don’t* think that now?’

When Kiba locked eyes with him, Issei almost started at the intensity of his gaze.

'I do not. Your growth is truly frightening. It would be easy to attribute it all to your Sacred Gear... but you possess a frightening drive to improve. An aptitude for Aether manipulation that even Akeno envies.'

Heh. What was it Rias said? No skill for Aether Manipulation?

Though his bravado felt a little misplaced.

Because he owed a lot to the Codex... even if he didn't like admitting it.

And stolen valor didn't sit right with him.

'Don't be so quick to dismiss my Sacred Gear,' Issei corrected with a grin. 'I dunno if it's quite "pull whatever sword that perfectly counters my opponent out of my ass" kind of broken... but it's pretty powerful, you know? Longinus and all that...'

Kiba had the good graces to not challenge the claim, even if they currently bathed in the evidence of how busted the Codex was.

Issei left it at that, and had to try really, really hard not to burst out laughing at the way Kiba was basically vibrating in his seat.

He's desperate to know, but too polite to ask...

Issei grinned and leaned back, interlocking his hands behind his head.

Well, if he wants to know...

'Issei-san?'

There it is.

'What... what exactly is the nature of the Draconic Codex?' Kiba asked. Realising he might have overstepped, he hurried to add, 'If you don't mind me asking, that is. Please don't feel obligated just because I'm your senpai—'

'Oh *relax*, pretty-boy. I'm not gonna bite your head off for asking a question.'

Kiba visibly relaxed.

But when Issei didn't immediately elaborate, the Knight began to grow increasingly agitated.

Man, this is so fun...

'You're teasing me.'

This time, Issei really did laugh at the way the normally affable pretty-boy was glaring at him in annoyance.

He didn't even try to deny it.

'Sorry, bro. You make it too easy.'

Kiba grunted, his face settling into an annoyed frown.

'You sound just like Akeno.'

Issei shot upright, his face twisting into exaggerated horror.

'How *dare* you!'

There was a beat of silence where they stared each other down...then they both broke into peels of laughter.

When Issei noticed Kiba's curiosity hadn't faded—if anything, the guy was giving him full puppy-eyes now—he relented.

'Rias never went into your past,' Issei began, 'but she hinted it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. Given that, I'm just gonna assume you're not much of a gamer?'

Now it was Kiba's turn to look confused.

'Not especially....no.'

Issei groaned and palmed his face.

This... was going to take a while.

When he was done explaining, Kiba sat back slowly, a stupefied expression settling across his face.

Issei grinned at the reaction. He'd expected something like that. They sat in companionable silence while the Knight processed everything he'd just learned, steam curling lazily between them.

Issei heard his phone ping.

He frowned faintly. Rias?

With a lazy flick of his fingers, his phone flew out of the bag he'd left near the treeline and sailed toward him. He caught it before it overshot and smacked into the opposite trees, the cool aluminium slapping wetly against his palm

He opened the notification.

Group Chat

Matsuda: Oi cuckboy, your girl busy tonight?

Matsuda: I heard she likes 'em big?

Matsuda: Not like your baby dick

Matsuda followed up the text with a pic of himself standing naked in front of a mirror in the gym locker room, his phone held up and aimed at his reflection. His bulging muscles were pumped and his skin glistened with a sheen of sweat—no doubt having just got done with his workout.

His huge, hard cock also hung obscenely between his powerful thighs, its tip dangling near his knees.

How the hell did Rias take something so big, holy hell...

Group Chat

Motohama: Lol

Motohama: Also, ew. Can you not?

It was time to put these clowns in their place.

Group Chat

Issei: I'm about to dunk my head in this onsen. If, by the time I come back up, that message is still there, the next time I let you touch my girl won't be until you send us a video of you blowing Motohama.

Issei: Think I'm joking? Test me, fuckface.

He put his phone down in the grass and did as he said, dunking his head in the water for a solid ten seconds before resurfacing and wiping his face dry.

When he picked up his phone again and opened the messaging app, the group chat looked markedly different.

Group Chat

Motohama: WTF, what did I do?

Matsuda: Shut up, dumbass!

Scrolling up, Issei grinned when he saw the messages had been deleted. Thankfully, he'd taken a screenshot and sent it to Rias. She probably wouldn't see it until later, but he figured his girl would enjoy the eye-candy.

Sure, he didn't appreciate Matsuda's tone, but that didn't mean he didn't think his buddy had a point. When she finally got around to checking her phone and saw the message, Issei didn't doubt she'd be *ravenous*.

Maybe, after Rias was done with her ritual, they could have their own group celebration later?

It wouldn't hurt to get a whole boatload of more points. Especially since he'd planned on forming his core real soon.

That...and as hot as the video of her night with Matsuda was—he'd watched it countless times since—Issei *really* wanted to watch it *live*.

Man, that would be so fucking hot...

He set the phone carefully out of reach of the water this time and sank back into the spring, letting the heat soak into his bruised shoulders.

He hoped Kiba couldn't tell how hard his dick was.

That would be... awkward.

'That's... that's absurd.'

Wondering if he'd somehow already been found out, Issei let out a chuckle when he realised Kiba was still trying to process everything he'd told him about the Codex.

'Buddy, you don't even know the half of it.'

Literally...

'And that's how you got this?' Kiba gestured faintly at the spring, at the dragon, and at Issei himself. 'Buchou's sudden and rapid advancement with her rituals? Your frightening growth?'

Issei shrugged, unconcerned.

'Pretty much. All of it was stuff I picked up from the store. Stuff I could buy with points. Cultivating pure Aether. The danger sense. The Sword. The dimensional vault I store it in. I still have to cultivate myself, but everything I buy from the store makes me more powerful in some way, whether explicitly or implicitly.'

He lifted a shoulder.

'Just like this spring. It doesn't boost my power all that much—I just didn't have that many impurities to cleanse—but it makes all of *you* more powerful...which in turn helps *me*.'

Kiba stared at him like he'd just sprouted a second head.

I wonder if that's a thing...?

A few long seconds passed.

‘How do you *earn* the points?’ Kiba asked finally, brows knitting together. ‘There must be a drawback. Some kind of limitation.’

Issei shot him a sideways look.

‘Why does there *have* to be a drawback?’ He shot back, his tone flat. ‘You can pull swords that perfectly counter your opponents out of your ass, with the only limitation being your imagination, and you’re talking to me about drawbacks...?’

Kiba winced slightly.

‘Well...there *is* a drawback. It costs Aether.’

The correction was weak. Even Kiba didn’t sound convinced.

Issei waved him off.

‘Don’t worry about how I get points. You wouldn’t believe me anyway.’

That did absolutely nothing to dampen Kiba’s curiosity.

If anything, the Knight seemed to straighten subtly, attention sharpening. He reminded Issei of an over-eager Golden Retriever. Innocent and loyal to a fault.

What happened to the cool, aloof fixer? I swear he’s losing aura every minute I’m around him...

Issei scrubbed both hands over his face, then leaned back with a sigh.

‘Sex. We get points with sex.’

Kiba blinked.

'You're teasing me again.'

'I told you you wouldn't believe me.'

Silence settled again.

Issei dunked his head under and came back up with a sharp inhale, stretching so hard his back cracked like a xylophone. The relief made him groan low in his throat.

Kiba was still staring.

'You're... you're *serious*?' he asked carefully, lips pressed into a thin line. 'You're not joking?'

Issei turned to him, brow raised.

'If I was, what would be the punchline? It'd be a stupid joke.'

Kiba's mouth opened.

Closed.

Opened again.

Steam drifted between them as he visibly tried to process that bombshell.

Issei had expected embarrassment.

Instead, he felt... nothing.

No shame. No awkwardness. Even if Kiba somehow found out about the truth of the Codex, about his and Rias' cuckolding play.

The more Kiba dug, the more certain he became that he genuinely didn't care who knew about his and Rias' sex life anymore.

Hell, it might even make things easier.

His gaze flicked briefly over the horizon where he expected Rias to be, performing final checks on her Grand Ritual.

If I didn't know Rias would castrate me for even suggesting it, I'd probably even be fine if Pretty-Boy had a turn with her too. That'd be kinda hot...

The thought came easily.

Too easily.

He ignored the faint possessive twinge that followed. A twinge that just made the thought even hotter in his mind.

He really was a cuck, despite how he'd clapped back at his friends for giving him shit about it. Just the thought of Rias fucking other guys for him had his cock throbbing so hard it ached...

I wonder if that was the goal of the Codex. Or if it had intended to make the accumulation of points more difficult by gating them behind something so reprehensible.

A cunning plan that failed spectacularly when it came into contact with a degenerate such as himself.

Maybe that's the real drawback Kiba was referring to. I wonder if Albion's wielder has to accumulate points in the same way, or if he was offered a different method that the Dragon had thought would be equally reprehensible to its wielder?

An interesting thought...

Kiba finally leaned back into the water and pressed his lips into a thin line.

'Never mind. I don't think I care to know the specifics.'

Issei grinned.

'Figured as much.'

They let the silence settle again.

But this time it felt different.

Charged.

Not awkward, but not as comfortable either. Kiba was looking at him differently now, as if only truly seeing him for the first time.

'Speaking of specifics.' Issei decided to be the one breaking the silence and interrogating this time. 'How's things with you and the nun?'

Kiba stiffened.

Gotcha...

Given how tightly wound the guy was, Issei wouldn't have been shocked if she was his first girlfriend.

Not like he was one to talk.

'What? You went all *Conan* on me a second ago and now you're shy when it comes to talking about *your* girl?'

'She's not—'

Issei raised an eyebrow.

Kiba exhaled slowly and slouched deeper into the water. He took a beat to weigh his options before letting out another sigh and speaking.

'What do you want to know?'

Ooh. Now we're properly bonding.

'I've got a feeling she's not the kind of girl to jump into bed with pretty boys that fast. You know. Nun and all—'

'Excommunicated,' Kiba corrected immediately.

Issei froze.

Kiba held his gaze.

Issei's eyes widened.

'No *fucking* way.'

'A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell.'

Issei stared at him, mind racing far faster than he'd ever admit aloud. Just how freaky would a former nun *be* in the sack? All those repressed desires, all that curiosity and innocence?

Yeah.

He absolutely wasn't touching that topic with a ten-foot pole. They might be bonding, but he and Kiba weren't *that* close.

Yet.

Maybe his Danger Sense had evolved to detect more than just a punch to the face...?

'Fine. What about the Devil thing? She's cool with that?'

Kiba took a moment before answering.

'I don't believe Asia would mind me saying that the reason she was excommunicated was because she used her Sacred Gear to heal a Devil. She apparently cares less about one's nature... and more about the content of their character.'

'Apparently,' Issei muttered, chewing on that.

Had he known the nun had a Sacred Gear? He couldn't remember if Rias had mentioned it.

Even if she had, he probably wouldn't have paid all that much attention.

Rias could be *distracting*.

He shifted slightly in the water.

'You don't really strike me as the casual fling type. You obviously like her. A lot.' He tilted his head and regarded Kiba thoughtfully. 'You thought about what happens next? After we deal with the Fallen?'

Kiba winced.

Ooh, he's in trouble! Dude's got it bad!

'I don't think Rias would fight it if you *really* wanted to leave—'

'I would *never*.'

The reply was immediate and fierce. He'd clearly been offended by the mere suggestion.

Issei blinked and raised both hands.

'Alright, relax. I wasn't finished. I was gonna ask if you think your girl'd have a problem settling down *here* after everything's been handled.'

Kiba looked faintly embarrassed at his outburst. He nervously fiddled with his own fingers before answering.

'I... don't know. And I'm ashamed that I've even considered asking.'

'Fuck that,' Issei said immediately, waving it off. 'You think I'd have landed Rias if I didn't grow a pair? You said the nun—'

'Asia,' Kiba corrected automatically.

‘Right. *Asia*. You said she’s rebellious. Fine. But she’s still a woman. And I’ll tell you one thing experience has taught me—women like to be chased. They want to feel wanted. Tell her you love her and you want her to stay, she’ll melt. Trust me.’

Kiba’s expression turned drier by the second then, before he responded, he swung his arm in an arc and sent a *wave* of purification water at his face.

Kiba was a devil. And while not as strong as their peerage’s Rook, he was *way* stronger than a human. The wave he’d sent Issei’s wave was literally that, and sent him tumbling and flailing in the lake-sized *onsen*.

When he regained control of himself and stalked back towards the grinning knight with a heated glare, Issei promised he would get his revenge.

‘Experience?’ he asked, his voice a dry deadpan. ‘You’ve been with *one* girl. And from what I understand, *she* was the one who pursued *you*.’

Issei puffed up immediately.

‘She did not! That’s *slander*. Okay, maybe I needed a few very obvious hints, but look at her and look at me. I’m not some *bishi-boy* like you. Women like *that* don’t just fall into my lap.’

‘Is that so?’ Kiba replied mildly. ‘I couldn’t help but notice Akeno-san was acting rather... familiar with you last night.’

‘Can you stop poking holes in my sage wisdom? Just confess, you weirdo. Guys that look like you shouldn’t be this chicken. It’s offensive.’

Kiba chuckled.

Issei rolled his eyes.

Fine.

If words weren't landing, he'd escalate.

He cupped his hands under the water, bringing them together like he was about to *kamehameha*.

Cosmic essence flowed.

He didn't consciously decide what would happen next. He just imagined something denser and more impactful than a splash of water. Something that would smack, rather than drench.

With that thought in mind, he *pressed*.

The water between his palms compressed.

Gravity *intensified*.

The liquid thickened unnaturally, resisting his fingers as it tried to bulge out between them.

He increased the pressure.

Uniform. Even all the way around. No weak spots, no leaks. All of it contained in a tighter and tighter sphere.

The water grew elastic. Springy even. Almost like a stress ball.

Or a boob.

It was dense. Denser than it had been before, at least.

It was also hot in a way he could feel even in the scalding *onsen* waters.

Issei felt the temperature spike in his palms as the pressure built.

A process that felt like minutes, in reality, happened in but a blink of an eye.

Then he snapped his hands forward.

The sphere flew, and even as it left his palm, Issei focused his will on maintaining the pressure. On keeping the water locked into a dense sphere of gravitational forces.

Where he struggled to affect Kiba with his magic, the baseball-sized globe of water was simple.

It struck Kiba square in the face with a wet, solid smack.

The force of the impact was unnaturally strong. Like a punch to the face from a human boxer who knew what he was doing.

...but still just a *human*.

The instant it connected, Issei released his hold over the projectile. The sphere exploded back into normal droplets and streams of water, splashing harmlessly across the surface of the *onsen*.

Kiba's head snapped back.

'Ow! What in the Hells was *that*?'

'That's for being a smart ass!'

Kiba rubbed his cheek, glaring.

Issei barely noticed.

He was staring at his own hands.

That had been...*really* cool.

He hadn't planned it exactly like that. He'd just... kept pushing until the water had seemingly changed states.

This theory had promise...

Man...my powers are so fun to experiment with!

He didn't understand why other Devils insisted on broad Aether manipulation when specialising like this felt so... *awesome*.

He could already do *so much* with cosmic essence.

But still, he couldn't help but think he was only scratching the surface...

Maybe even Cosmic Essence is too vague and limiting too...?

A flash at the edge of his vision pulled Issei's attention away from his hands.

Issei looked up, scanning the horizon.

Another flash lit the mountains beyond KU.

Then another.

It was coming from the direction of one of the ritual sites on the outskirts of Kuoh proper. If he focused, he could feel the ley-line deep underground—a slow, ancient current—stretching toward that exact point from the convergence beneath the manor.

His stomach tightened.

He turned to Kiba, frowning.

‘I thought Rias had to activate the ritual from *here*.’

Kiba’s expression mirrored his. All traces of playfulness were gone.

‘She *does*.’

The air shifted, then the trees at the edge of the clearing parted without a sound.

Lucien stepped through the gap like a shadow in the night, silent despite his body being made up of servos, springs and gears.

His eyes no longer glowed white and his mask had...*changed*.

Gone was the genial, unsettling smile that haunted Issei’s dreams. The new face was sharp. All straight lines and severe angles.

Less human, more *Gundam*, if Issei had to pick a word for it.

At the sight of him, Kiba moved instantly, so fast he was little more than a blur to Issei’s eyes.

He launched to his feet and vaulted out of the *onsen*, completely unconcerned by his nakedness for the nanosecond that lasted before he'd pulled his clothes on.

Issei followed without hesitation. Now wasn't the time to second guess the Devils used to this kind fo shit.

Unlike Kiba, he didn't move to dress himself manually. He summoned his clothes from the vault, and they manifested around him in a blink.

Okay. Rias was right. This was the right choice...

By the time he finished, Kiba was already in front of Lucien while tying his wet hair in a short ponytail.

'What's the situation?'

Lucien did not greet them.

Seemingly against its snarky nature, it didn't bitch, nor did it insult.

'The Mistress, along with Himejima-san and Toujou-san, were beset by Exorcists during final inspection of the ritual site. They are holding their own. The Mistress has demanded her consort be protected at all costs.'

Issei's jaw tightened.

'Fuck *that*. We need to help her.'

Lucien's head turned toward him sharply.

Issei braced for contempt, for scorn and ridicule.

It didn't come. Along with the mask change had come with a change of personality, apparently.

'The Mistress is engaged in serious combat and is using her bloodline freely. You are not accustomed to fighting beside her at full strength. Your presence would cause her to hold back and would hinder her.'

That hit harder than Issei was expecting. Before he could wallow in self-pity, Kiba stepped in to soften the blow to his ego.

'He's right. Now isn't the time. If they're attacking, they must have discovered the ritual. They're trying to stop it.'

Lucien nodded.

'That is the Mistress' assessment as well. An attack here is likely imminent.'

Kiba cursed under his breath.

Issei's mind flicked instinctively to the Relic Exchange. He subconsciously pulled up the store and scrolled through the dozens of pages it fed him with his erratic thoughts driving it, but none of the options seemed ideal given the amount of points he had left.

None expect one.

His mind kept going back to that one thing.

One purchase.

It wouldn't help *directly*, not in the way he thought they needed. But it would change...*everything*.

If it worked...

'How many?' Kiba asked, his tone professional despite worry lines creasing his brow.

'The Mistress did not specify. She requested we confirm via the map in the War Room.'

Kiba swore again.

'If they have come in force, there will be Templars.'

Lucien's voice did not change, and his news was no less helpful.

'The Mistress is currently engaged with a Paladin. A Holy Sword user.'

Kiba's expression hardened. Something dark and *hateful* flashed in his eyes, but the emotion was buried by the time Issei blinked his eyes.

'Spectacular.'

Issei exhaled sharply.

'I don't know what half of that means. So what's the plan? Or do we just keep standing here with our dicks in our hands?'

Kiba thought for only a second.

'We move to the War Room and provide tactical support. Where is Sona-Kaichou? Do we need to inform her of what's happening?'

They didn't waste time.

The three of them moved toward the manor in tight formation. Issei resisted the urge to take to the air. Flying would make him an easy target for church assassins hiding in the dense forest surrounding the manor.

He might be new to this, but he wasn't an idiot.

And the memory of being sniped by that Fallen *cunt* was still a fresh one.

'Sitri-san is also engaged with invading Exorcists,' Lucien replied crisply as they ran.

Kiba's face tightened, a worried frown marring his handsome features.

Issei blinked. He hadn't expected for the experienced Knight to crumble under pressure like this...

Then he gave himself a mental slap when he realised the painfully obvious.

His girl's an excommunicated nun for fuck's sake. He's worried about her.

They burst into the main atrium.

And Issei's Danger Sense detonated like a *nuclear bomb*.

Without thinking, without hesitation—just as Kiba had beaten into him—he *moved*.

His torso bent backward at the waist while his feet remained planted.

A beam of golden light tore through the space his head had occupied a fraction of a second earlier.

Time felt stretched.

And in that same motion—before his brain had caught up and with his lips peeled back in a furious snarl— his arm snapped forward.

The Voidsteel Destroyer erupted from his vault like the world's most terrifying missile.

One of the attackers had just enough time to widen her eyes in shock.

The weapon fell *fast*, there was no time to defend. There was no time to even pray to her God.

Two tonnes of sharpened voidsteel *tore* through her body.

There was no elegant duel.

No monologue, no witty exchange.

She split in half like wet parchment.

The sword embedded into the stone behind her with a thunderous crack as the two halves of her bisected body fell to the floor in a wet splat.

And Issei felt...nothing.

No, that wasn't quite right. He felt...vindication.

The last time some holy cunt had tried to snipe him from behind, she'd technically killed him.

This time? Not only had he avoided the killing blow, he'd acted without hesitating, just as Kiba had instructed. Just as Rias would want. His instincts guided him and, instead, his *opponent* had hesitated.

And now she was three feet shorter.

So it wasn't quite right that he felt *nothing*—though a shrink would have likely said that was preferable to the grim satisfaction Issei felt as that cunt's partner turned red with rage and anguish.

Silence lasted half a heartbeat.

Then...

Chaos.