

CHAPTER 22

By the time Issei had arrived at the training room, in the depths of the mountain-top manor, he was already exhausted.

Not the good kind either—the satisfying, earned kind after a solid workout or a long night in bed with Rias. This was the bone-deep, brain-fried exhaustion that came from doing everything he didn't particularly enjoy, back to back, despite wanting to run back to Rias' side or focus on his cultivation.

Work. Homework. More homework. A phone call with his mum that somehow turned into wedding planning even though he'd very clearly said he'd let her and Rias handle everything. Then, *finally*, back to cultivation.

Rias was still busy with preparing her ritual, so Issei had been planning to throw himself into absorbing as much Aether as his body could handle. Oh, and lest he forget, he'd had to dodge and run out on an overly friendly Akeno too before earning his private cultivation time.

The turbo-slut had been acting...*weird*.

By the time he'd finished all that, all he wanted to do was collapse somewhere comfortable and let sleep take him.

Instead, Kiba had somehow found him where he'd been hiding from Akeno, and brought him *here*.

To get his ass kicked, apparently.

Hard.

They stood in a wide, circular training chamber buried deep beneath the mountain-top manor—and just as he'd come to expect from his predictable, soon-to-be wife, the facility looked like an over-engineered, gothic dungeon. The walls were thick, smooth stone shot through with

faintly glowing veins of magic, reinforced enough to survive whatever lunacy Rias's peerage decided to unleash inside them.

That part, at least, was comforting.

The part where Issei's body bounced off those walls like a thrown sack of meat...less so.

He barely had time to register Kiba's movement before a sharp impact detonated across his ribs, sending him skidding sideways through the air. He hit the wall back-first, felt the stone crack—then immediately repair—behind him, then dropped to the floor in a heap.

Before he could even groan, the pain evaporated—burning away in a warm rush as the chamber's leyline-fed Aether surged through him, knitting bone, muscle, and bruised pride back together almost instantly.

He sucked in a breath and pushed himself up.

'Okay,' Issei wheezed, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck. 'I get it. You're fast. Want a medal?'

Kiba didn't even look winded.

The bastard pretty-boy stood a few metres away, sword still sheathed, posture relaxed and polite in that infuriating way only he could manage. His blond hair wasn't even mussed up.

'This is important,' Kiba said apologetically. 'You're hesitating again.'

'Sorry I'm still not used to kicking people in the face!' Issei snapped, but his eyes widened as Kiba had vanished from the spot faster than his eyes could track.

Thankfully, his danger sense was faster.

If nothing else, the pretty-boy's training was effective.

On instinct, Issei attempted to dodge out of the way. But Kiba was just *too damn fast*.

'Oh shi—!'

The kick hit him square in the chest before he could finish swearing, launching him clean off his feet. This time he twisted mid-air on instinct, fighting the spin, and instead of smashing straight into the wall he fell sideways—gravity bending to his will, snapping ninety degrees so the floor became a wall and the wall became a floor.

He hit, rolled, and pushed off again in one fluid motion.

Couldn't stop the hit, but at least I didn't pancake against the wall again...

Issei grinned despite himself.

In his defence, he was getting better at not being kicked in the face. Progress came in small, painful increments, but came, it did.

The real problem wasn't strength anymore. Or durability. Or even stamina—cultivation had fixed most of that and then some. He was pretty sure the strength with which Kiba was hitting him would have been enough to crumple a *car*, and while the room healed Issei after every strike, the damage had never been enough to put him down.

No. His problem...was *speed*.

Kiba was just... unfairly fast.

Trying to keep up with him the normal way—running, jumping, reacting—was pointless. Even with his reinforced body, Issei was never going to match that kind of raw, honed movement. Enhanced by his Evil Piece too, apparently.

No, even if he were allowed to use his own Evil Piece—something he'd yet to try on Rias' advice so he didn't grow to rely on it—Kiba would *still* be faster than him.

So he'd stopped trying to outrun him.

Instead, he threw himself around the room by cheating.

Gravity twisted beneath his feet as he pushed off empty air, flung himself upward at impossible angles, then snapped his own weight sideways mid-motion. He rebounded off nothing, fell upward, then slingshotted himself back down in a corkscrewing arc that made his stomach lurch.

Sure, the movements weren't as elegant as he'd like.

They weren't controlled.

But he *was* fast. And more importantly, *unpredictable*.

Kiba reappeared in a blur of speed, his leg outstretched in a kick that *would* have sent him into the wall again had Issei not already changed directions.

For half a second, Kiba looked *genuinely* ruffled.

'Yes!' Issei barked, adrenaline surging. 'That's what I'm talkin' about!'

He gently touched down, then his own stomach caught up with his brain.

'Hhhngh'

Moving at unpredictable vectors, in random directions whenever his danger senses screamed at him, was amazingly effective. The problem was...he just wasn't used to it, to the rapid movements and sickening shifts in perspective.

At least his new body could deal with the intense shifts in inertia...

Gravity snapped again. His inner ear revolted. The floor tried to become the ceiling. His limbs flailed as his sense of up, down, forward, and please make it stop all blurred together.

Issei slammed into the ground shoulder-first, bounced once, then rolled to a stop on his back, staring up at the glowing stone ceiling.

'I...think I need to work on that,' he muttered weakly.

Kiba appeared upside down in his vision, concern flickering across his features. 'Are you okay, Issei-san?'

'I'm fine, no damage the room can't heal,' he waved off, getting up slowly on wobbly knees.

Unless you count my pride...

Kiba regarded him for a moment, then offered a polite, almost gentle smile before nodding once.

'What did you learn?'

Issei snorted softly and rolled his sore shoulder.

'That you're stupidly fast.'

Kiba nodded without the slightest hint of false modesty. 'Yes. And?'

Issei grimaced. 'That I'm a long way from being able to beat your ass.'

'Not as far as you think,' Kiba replied humbly. 'Remember, you're a mage who is only using his magic defensively, and I'm not holding back my speed. A speedy frontliner is also a mage's biggest weakness.'

That... was true.

But he couldn't help but feel patronized at the same time.

Issei also noted what didn't need to be said. Kiba wasn't even using his sword—let alone that broken Sacred Gear that lets him pull swords that perfectly counter his opponents out of his ass.

Seeing Kiba's eyebrow lift expectantly, Issei sighed and shrugged.

'I need to use my magic more creatively to overcome my limitations?'

'Are you asking me or telling me?'

At his glare, Kiba cringed and shrugged apologetically. 'Apologies. It seems Buchou's methods are rubbing off on me.'

That doesn't surprise me.

'But yes,' Kiba agreed easily. 'Technically correct, but not what I'm trying to teach you right now. Though it is a valuable lesson.'

Issei frowned slightly. 'Then what—?'

'In a fight,' Kiba cut in, his tone sharpening just enough to be biting, 'a *real* fight... to hesitate, even for a blink, means death. This isn't like the stories, where you have all the time in the world to daydream to assess your opponents and observe the battlefield. You pause, you *die*.'

Before Issei could argue, Kiba raised a hand, forestalling him.

‘Rias knows this is all new to you. She knows you’ve never been in combat where the stakes are real. Regardless, she has implored me to train that hesitation out of you. That instinctual fear before being struck. The ruinous doubt before landing the killing blow.’

Kiba’s eyes were steady. He’d never seen the pretty boy more serious.

Issei swallowed.

‘Most novices don’t die because they’re outmatched, they die because they blink at the wrong time. They pause and show mercy instead of running their opponent through. They flinch and recoil when they’re struck. They freeze when something moves faster than their mind can process.’

Faster than Issei’s eyes could track, faster than his mind could process, Kiba’s fist snatched out as if he were about to jab him in the face.

Issei flinched, the fist inches away before making contact.

He scowled.

‘This is normal,’ Kiba placated. ‘It’s *natural*. And it’s *dangerous*.’

Issei exhaled slowly through his nose and nodded.

How could he argue?

Even if he wanted to argue, Kiba had just spent the past half hour not only kicking his ass, but proving his point before he’d even made it. Issei *had* flinched each time Kiba’s boot had come

flying out of his periphery, he *had* hesitated when the blonde had very clearly left openings for him to exploit.

Even so, he doubted Kiba would have let him land a clean strike.

Probably kick my ass harder to prove another point...

‘Easier said than done...’

Kiba nodded, not unkindly. Sympathetically. ‘I agree. Which is why we train.’

He straightened slightly, posture shifting.

‘Now, let’s switch things up. I want to see how you attack with that sword Rias told me about.’

Issei blinked.

Then he smiled.

Issei grinned in excitement, his hand reaching out as reality tore open. The vault yawned wide.

The Voidsteel Destroyer tore free from its resting place and shot into the chamber, stopping dead between them as if caught by an invisible grip. The absurdly large blade hovered there, silent and obedient, its mass completely ignored by the world around it.

Kiba’s expression shifted.

Not alarmed. Not impressed either. He looked concerned, his face shifting to a disapproving frown.

His gaze flicked from the sword to the closing vault, eyes narrowing slightly.

'Cool, huh?' Issei offered.

'Slow,' Kiba corrected immediately. 'You won't have time to pull it out in the middle of a battle.'

Issei rolled his eyes and waved him off. 'Don't worry about that. Rias and I are working on it. That issue should be fixed by tonight.'

When we go shopping!

Kiba nodded once, placated. 'Good.'

He stepped back, settling into a ready stance.

'Now. You are going to try and hit me with that...*sword*. Do not hold back. Do not hesitate. Even if you manage to strike me, the room will heal all damage.'

Issei hesitated.

Not out of fear.

He was doing the math.

He glanced at the blade hovering obediently at his side, then back at Kiba.

'...You sure about that, Pretty Boy?'

Kiba tilted his head and grinned, amused by the nickname and his concern. 'Quite sure.'

Issei still hesitated.

It still surprised him how little the devils he'd interacted with since reincarnation respected physics. Sure, they were strong. Supernaturally so. They threw cars. Shattered stone. Tanked hits that would turn regular people into pink mist.

But this sword?

This thing weighed *two tonnes*. But it wasn't just heavy, it was *dense*. Almost supernaturally so. Just rough-eyeing it, this thing was denser than *tungsten*. And Issei wasn't just swinging it—he could accelerate it.

Hard.

He didn't care how tough Kiba thought he was. If that thing connected while moving at ten g's...?

He looked between Kiba, the hovering blade, and the far wall.

Rather than attack the pretty-boy like he was clearly being baited into doing, Issei exhaled slowly and began channeling cosmic essence into the Voidsteel Destroyer instead.

Doing it gradually would have been smarter. It would have been easier.

But he wasn't trying to be gentle. He was trying to make a point.

Gravity thickened around the blade, space itself seeming to bow under its presence as Issei poured power into it. The resistance was immediate and almost overwhelming—like he was trying to move a *mountain* with his bare hands. His chest tightened, breath hitching as his cosmic essence drained faster than he liked.

Yeah. Moving something this heavy like this sucks. I can't wait until I form my own core. Imagine what I could do...

Still...

The thrill crawled up his spine as the warping intensified, the air around the sword distorting, compressing. Then, with a sharp gesture, Issei released it.

The Voidsteel Destroyer *disappeared*.

One moment it hovered innocently between them.

The next...*catastrophe*.

The blade crossed the chamber in a blink, not cutting through the air so much as displacing it. The compression wave arrived before the sound did, slamming into them like a physical wall.

The sword hit. Not with a clang, but with a *detonation*.

Their eardrums screamed as the shockwave rebounded through the chamber, a concussive *whump* that rattled teeth and sent dust geysering outward in a rolling cloud. Stone didn't just crack—it *shattered*, fragments tearing loose as the reinforcement enchantments flared violently, runes blazing as they drank in Aether at a prodigious rate, trying to resist the overwhelming force

It failed.

The supposedly indestructible wall *exploded*, stone pulverising under pressures it had never been meant to experience. Shards the size of boulders were flung back into the chamber, before smashing into the opposite wall and vanishing in clouds of dust.

The sound came a heartbeat later—an overlapping thunderclap and shriek of tortured air that left Issei's ears ringing and his vision swimming.

Dust swallowed everything.

Issei staggered, coughing, one hand braced on his knee as what little of the room's Aether that remained rushed to repair ruptured capillaries and screaming inner ears.

'...shit,' he croaked.

I was just saying Devils don't respect physics enough, then I go do that!

Across from him, Kiba stood frozen, eyes wide, coat fluttering violently in the afterwash of displaced air.

The training room looked like someone had set off a *bomb* inside.

As the dust slowly thinned, the wall came back into view. Or what remained of it. The enchantments were still glowing, struggling visibly as stone flowed back into place in jagged, reluctant layers. Issei could *feel* the Aether rushing in to fix the damage, and it was a *colossal* amount.

Uh oh. No way Rias doesn't notice. She's gonna kick my ass.

The Voidsteel Destroyer was embedded half a metre into the reinforced masonry, utterly unharmed.

Issei and Kiba stared at it in shared, awed shock before Issei snapped out of it and called his weapon back to him—before the room tried to fix the wall with his sword still lodged inside the stone.

The blade tore free and drifted back to his side obediently.

Issei slowly turned to Kiba, his lingering shock giving way to smug satisfaction at the look in his senpai's eyes.

'You *sure* you could tank one of those hits, Pretty Boy?'

Kiba swallowed thickly and turned toward him, his movements just a touch too stiff. He managed to school his features into something neutral, but the tightness at the corners of his eyes gave him away.

'...perhaps not.'

They didn't have time to unpack that.

A portal tore open near the entrance of the chamber in a flare of crimson light, and Rias Gremory stormed through like a raging bull.

'What in the *Hells* was—'

She stopped dead in her tracks.

Her gaze swept over the wrecked wall, the glowing repair enchantments struggling to keep up, the lingering dust still hanging in the air... and then slowly, deliberately, settled on Issei.

'*You* did this?'

Issei cleared his throat and scratched the back of his head, suddenly very aware of how guilty he looked and trying very, *very* hard not to preen.

'Kiba wanted me to attack,' he said carefully. 'I figured we needed a demonstration of why that might not be a good idea...'

Rias' eyes slid to Kiba.

Kiba nodded once. Stiffly. His posture was rigid, eyes still a little too tight.

When Rias turned back to Issei, he had to try really hard not to grin at the clear pride shining through her irritation. No matter how much she tried to hide it.

‘Boys,’ she muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose. ‘I leave you unsupervised for *one* evening...’

She jabbed a finger at Issei, then pointed toward the exit.

‘Training’s over while the room finishes repairing itself. *You*—come with me. I need to make sure you don’t bring the manor down around us. Honestly, you’re like a child with a canon. I blame myself...’

Issei obediently followed behind his annoyed—and very obviously proud—fiancée with a skip to his step. As he passed Kiba, he shot him a cheeky wink.

‘Now you can go back to screwing that nun girlfriend of yours, bro. Thank me later.’

Rias froze.

Slowly, she turned.

Kiba sputtered, colour rising rapidly in his face as Rias rounded on him.

Wait, she didn’t know? I thought it was obvious...

‘...*What?*’

The words came out like a hiss. Not angry, per se, just confused. And, clearly, demanding an explanation.

Kiba straightened as Rias rounded on him, making sure to shoot Issei one final glare that promised retribution during their next training session.

Issei didn't care.

Rias was no longer thinking about her nuked wall.

As far as he was concerned? Mission accomplished.

'Is this true?' Rias asked flatly.

Kiba stiffened under her scrutiny, clearly affronted—whether at being questioned or having his personal life dragged into the open, Issei couldn't tell. And he kinda understood his new buddy's annoyance too—Rias was hardly in a position to start bringing up her peerage's questionable love lives...

'I am *not* "screwing" Asia!' he snapped.

Rias' mouth dropped open and Issei winced.

Oh wow. I was just fucking with him. They're totally a thing.

Rias stared at him, incredulous, before pinching the bridge of her nose harder.

Issei knew that look.

A temple massage was definitely in his near future.

'You know what?' Rias said, tired. 'I don't have time for this. Just be careful, Kiba. And find me those damned Fallen.'

Without another word, she spun on her heel and stalked away, muttering under her breath in disbelief.

Issei followed—but not before getting one last jab in.

‘You’re a terrible liar, you know.’

Kiba glared at him, trying—and failing—to keep his composure. Issei almost laughed outright when he noticed the faint red creeping back up his cheeks.

Oh, that’s adorable.

‘You know,’ Issei added lightly, ‘if you keep glaring at me like that, you’re gonna hurt my feelings.’

The glare intensified.

This time, Issei chuckled.

‘Save that energy for next time we spar, Pretty Boy. No more holding back.’

‘Believe me,’ Kiba replied coldly, ‘I won’t be.’

Issei almost shuddered—but he didn’t want to ruin his cool exit.

Still... he had the distinct feeling he’d miss getting kicked in the face during their next session. Kiba had a look in his eyes that promised something more...pointy in his near future.

Trying not to think about it, he grinned, popped his collar and turned to followed after Rias.

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Rias stalked through the halls of the manor, her footsteps sharp and clipped against the stone floor. Issei followed just behind her, their footfalls echoing through the vaulted corridors in uneven rhythm.

Hopefully it's just a fling. The nun is alone and excommunicated. There shouldn't be any political fallout to worry about...

Her temples throbbed.

I just hope he doesn't have feelings for the girl. That will only end in heartbreak.

She stopped dead.

Rias groaned aloud as the pressure behind her eyes intensified, leaning back just in time to feel Issei gently bump into her. Without thinking, she sank into his much broader chest, letting her head fall back against him with a quiet, frustrated sound.

Who am I kidding? Of course he has feelings for her. Since when has Kiba ever had a casual fling?

Instead of wrapping his arms around her waist like he normally would, Issei surprised her.

Strong, careful fingers settled at her temples, thumbs pressing in slow, practiced circles that made her breath stutter.

She melted back into him despite herself.

'No more work tonight,' he murmured. 'I think...you need a break.'

'I'm so close though...' she protested weakly. The Grand Ritual, one that would etch her name in the history books, was tantalisingly within reach. It'd only take a few more hours of careful scribing to be—

'Then you can finish tomorrow.'

She felt him start to pull his hands away, likely to hug her, but Rias immediately reached up and grabbed his wrists, holding his hands firmly in place against her temples. She leaned harder into his chest and arched her back, all but purring like a kitten as he chuckled softly behind her.

I've trained him well. Issei truly is Best Boy...

After a solid minute of silent temple massage broken only by her breathing slowly evening out, Issei spoke again.

'I feel like stargazing. When was the last time we just... hung out? Without having sex?'

Rias huffed a quiet laugh.

'Too long ago,' she agreed.

Reluctantly, she released his hands and turned in his arms, leaning up to press a gentle kiss to his lips.

'I love you.'

'Love you too,' he replied easily, flashing that—now literally—devilishly charming grin.

They started walking again, slower this time. Hands linked and fingers intertwined.

'Did your new weapon *really* just destroy that wall?' she asked after a moment, frowning slightly. 'That room is rated for... a *lot* of punishment.'

With a boyish grin on his face, Issei enthusiastically launched into an explanation—the raw numbers, vectors, density comparisons, acceleration math, kinetic energy. Rias listened, eyes fixed on him, not because she really cared about the specifics, but because the way his eyes lit up when he talked like this was dangerously attractive.

His enthusiasm. His confidence. His underappreciated mind.

Satan help me... that is really sexy.

‘...and you didn’t hear a word I said,’ Issei finished dryly.

Rias blinked, then smiled wider. Not even bothering to deny it.

‘Honestly,’ he grumbled, running a hand through his sweat-slicked hair and sighing, ‘why do I even bother with you devils?’

Her grin turned sharp. ‘*You* devils? You’re one too now, Mister.’

He rolled his eyes, but his smile never faded.

‘Got a spot in this crazy manor where we can stargaze?’ he asked, circling back to his earlier, strange—if pleasant-sounding—request. ‘Preferably outside. With a ridiculous view.’

Rias slowed as she thought where in their home best matched his desires, but there was really only one obvious answer. Slowly, she nodded, a small smile tugging at her pink lips.

‘Yeah...I know the perfect place.’

With the hand not holding his, she reached out and flexed her will.

Reality tore.

A clean, crimson-edged rent opened in the air before them, space folding obediently aside. Even after all this time, Rias still felt a faint shiver of awe every time she pulled off this *amazing* feat of magic—the freedom, the convenience, the ability to go wherever, *whenever*?

It was *intoxicating*.

And it was all thanks to Issei and his Sacred Gear.

Remembering her enjoyable evening with the boys, she reminded herself with an impish grin that she played her own part too.

Then, with Issei looking at her and her mysterious smile with an adorable look of confusion, they stepped through.

Cool night air hit them immediately, sharp and refreshing after the magical warmth of the manor. Rias breathed it in deeply, the fresh air doing wonders to clear her mind.

They stood in a small clearing high on the mountain, trees parting just enough to offer an unobstructed view of the night sky. KU sprawled far below them, lights glittering like a mirror of the night sky—with the main city itself also visible in the distance. The lake reflected the moon perfectly, and the stars above felt close enough to touch.

Rias loved this place.

‘Mm,’ Issei murmured in approval, letting go of her hand and cracking his knuckles. ‘This’ll do.’

‘What—?’

She froze.

A colossal surge of Aether erupted beside her.

Rias spun, eyes widening in genuine alarm as wind whipped through the clearing and crimson runes flared into existence around them, bathing the forest in a blinding, ominous light. The sheer density of the Aether slammed into her senses like a physical weight—just like when her sister-in-law let loose and let her power run free.

The runes drank from the leyline beneath them as if starving, flaring brighter with each pulse.

‘Issei!’ she shouted, heart hammering. ‘What is this?! What did you do?!’

He stood at the centre of it all, arms spread slightly, eyes closed, utterly serene as the storm raged around him.

How doesn't he feel this? I can barely stand. Kiba or Koneko would instantly drop to their knees...Does he not feel it? Does his cultivation allow him to ignore auras that suppress using Aether...?

Her mind tried to run away with the implications. She forcibly dragged it back.

‘Let’s call it a dowry,’ he said lightly, his voice nearly swallowed by the violent gale as his eyes fluttered open, his lips quirked in a proud grin.

The runes pulsed so brightly she genuinely feared they’d overwhelm the manor’s privacy wards—but then, with one final flash, the light collapsed inward.

Silence fell.

The impromptu storm had settled.

The dense Aether...remained, but was quickly receding to manageable, comfortable levels.

The air still felt saturated and dense...but in a physical way. Oppressive and stifling...like a jungle. Or a...sauna?

Rias swallowed.

Why was it so humid? Why was her perfect, chilly clearing suddenly...*warm*?

As the spots faded from her vision and her new surroundings registered, she gaped.

The clearing had been transformed.

Rias had loved this spot, and had wrestled with herself for *years* over what—if anything—should ever be built here.

A pavilion, perhaps. A meditation terrace. Something gorgeous, no doubt. Something majestic.

Her fiancé had apparently decided to take the decision out of her hands.

‘Did... did you just buy an *onsen*?’ she asked, incredulous, the words tumbling out before she could stop them. ‘From the *relic exchange*?!’

Rias tried to ignore Issei’s stupid, too-proud giggling as she turned slowly, taking it in properly now.

The clearing had been reshaped in a way only possible through magic. Polished stone formed a broad, natural basin sunk gently into the mountainside, its edges smoothed and rounded as if worn down by centuries of flowing water rather than created in a single, impossible moment. The stone was dark and mineral-rich, shot through with subtle veins that caught the moonlight and reflected it back in muted silvers and blues.

Steam rose lazily from the water’s surface, drifting upward in slow curls that blurred the stars above and carried with them the faint, clean scent of minerals and heat. The spring itself glowed

softly, not with overt magic, but with the quiet warmth of something deeply anchored to the mountain and the leyline beneath it.

Beyond the pool, the land fell away sharply.

The view had already been incredible from up here—if a little obscured—but now with many of the trees cleared, it was like staring over the edge of a natural infinity pool.

Except there was nothing *pool-like* about this...treasure. It looked like a traditional, Japanese *onsen*, if you ignored the fact there was no geothermal activity below this mountain—she'd *checked*.

Totally normal, completely unremarkable...except for the statue.

At the far edge of the pool, carved directly from pristine white marble, an Eastern-style dragon coiled elegantly around a natural stone outcrop. Its body curved with effortless grace, scales rendered in precise, flowing detail. Its expression was calm, ancient, almost contemplative.

Water poured steadily from its open mouth, cascading into the spring below in a constant, soothing rush.

Rias gaped.

That statue wasn't a simple—if masterful—sculpture. It wasn't a *decoration*.

On its own, it radiated a density of Aether so profound it made her skin prickle. Not violent or oppressive. Just... *vast*. It was so dense with power that she had to actively suppress her fight or flight instincts, an irrational part of her mind fearful it would come to life and swallow them whole.

The *onsen* was large enough to be mistaken for a lake, its far shore half-hidden by steam and stone. The dragon's statue curved around it protectively, its body tracing the water's edge before vanishing behind rock and foliage.

It coiled upon itself in deliberate loops, the repetition making any attempt to judge its true length meaningless. Each section of its body was thicker than any tree she had seen in the human world, its scales layered like carved slabs of stone. The head alone rivalled a car in size, its horns and eyes a glistening jade.

Which meant that the water spilling from its mouth was less a soothing trickle and more a waterfall...though that somehow didn't take away from the clearly soothing ambiance.

She'd never seen an artefact so dense and masterful, not even in her brother's possession. Rias figured she could have a lifetime to study it, with the best tools money could buy, and she wouldn't even come *close* to unravelling this wonder's secrets...

She swallowed.

'Give me a little credit,' Issei said, rubbing the back of his neck. 'It's not *just* an *onsen*. You'd think I'd mess up a place you clearly loved if I didn't know what I was doing?' He hesitated, then smiled. 'I think it's easier if I just show you.'

Rias opened her mouth to respond—still stuck on the absurdity of an *onsen*, even a magical one, qualifying as a Relic he could just *purchase* from the Exchange—then her vision was bathed once more in crimson light as the notification bloomed into existence between them.

Draconic Codex Ascension Point Shop
Level 1

Draconic Relic Exchange
Draconic Purification Spring
Classification: Cultivation Aid
Cost: 30,000 AP

A minor corrective artefact devised for wyrms who have polluted their cores through improper practice or insufficient discipline.

Immersion within the spring gradually strips foreign accretions, residual taint, and structural impurities from the body and cultivation foundation, restoring the practitioner to a state suitable for renewed ascension attempts.

Intended for repeated use by low-potential or careless individuals who would otherwise be unworthy of further investment.

After reading through the text, Rias gaped, her eyes widening until it felt like they would pop out of her skull.

This spring—this relic—it was...it was...

As far as she knew, it was *impossible*.

And if the tooltip was to be believed...a mere *correctional aid* for underachieving dragons?!

This...this will change everything!

Issei's laughter echoed out in the clearing, but Rias was too stunlock to even notice.

'Oh man, you should see the look on your face! Where's my fucking phone when I need it?!

Ancient and noble families *bankrupted* themselves trying to purge their cores of impurities. Generations of hoarded wealth, sold artefacts, political favours called in and burned—all for *marginal gains*. Even with all the resources of the Satans, even *they* could only ever manage *partial* cleanses.

This relic—again, if the tooltip was to be believed—it purged *all* impurities while bathing?

How?!

Not only did it promise the seemingly impossible, *nowhere* did she see an upper limit.

It didn't matter if the subject was a relative newborn like Issei...or a monster like her brother.

No caps. No diminishing returns. No stated drawbacks.

It could cleanse *anyone*.

Completely.

Her hands trembled.

This wasn't just valuable.

This was *revolutionary*.

'I know it pisses you off when I buy things without asking,' Issei said lightly, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment when he realised the apparent enormity of what he'd just...*manifested* into reality, 'but you have no idea how amazing it is to see that look on your face right now. Totally worth the spankings you're gonna give me later...'

Rias turned to him slowly, her vision blurring as the implications finally crashed down on her all at once.

Issei faltered when he saw her expression. He scratched the back of his head, suddenly awkward, clearly unprepared for the raw emotion welling up in her eyes.

'I've... learned a lot about Devil society these past few weeks,' he continued, more softly now. 'About you. Your goals. What you actually want out of life.'

Rias swallowed thickly, her throat tight as she forced the words out.

‘...And what do I want in life?’

Her stomach flipped as he smiled at her—that warm, stupid, perfect smile she loved so much.

‘You mean other than my cute ass?’

When the joke didn’t land, Issei winced slightly, then sighed.

‘I mean—come on. It’s obvious, right?’ he said gently. ‘You hate your parents for trying to marry you off to that douchebag. You hate how they dangled your progression in front of you like a carrot on a stick. You hate how expensive it is to grow stronger, how the other nobles hoard and gatekeep the resources you need just to advance.’

Her heart thundered in her chest.

He was saying these things so casually. Like they were facts anyone could see. Like they weren’t wounds she kept buried deep and never voiced aloud—not even to Akeno.

‘I mean...what do you want in life? You want *freedom*,’ he finished simply. ‘Right?’

He gestured vaguely at the spring, the statue, the mountain itself.

‘This is freedom. Freedom to grow. Freedom from relying on anyone else. And I figured—correct me if I’m wrong—but this little hot spring makes you one of the most powerful and richest devils in existence.’

He grinned, mischief returning to his eyes.

‘You’ll never have to rely on anyone ever again. The Underworld will have to rely on *you*.’

Rias clenched her jaw, fighting the tears with everything she had.

She failed.

Swallowing hard, she stepped forward and cupped his face in her hands, thumbs brushing his cheeks as she forced herself to meet his gaze.

‘You were wrong about one thing...’

His eyebrows rose, uncertain.

‘This doesn’t make *me* the richest devil in the Underworld,’ she whispered, her breath hitching as she fought to reign in her emotions. ‘This makes *us* the richest devils in the Underworld.’

Before he could reply—before he could say anything stupid or perfect or incensitive—Rias surged forward and smashed her lips against his.

She kissed him. Fiercely. With everything she had. With all the love in her heart.

And this time, she didn’t stop the tears from falling.

Or the errant thought that came, unbidden.

Richest...and the most envied...