

Summary: The morning after the day he was killed by his girlfriend, Issei woke up and saw two things. First was Rias Gremory sleeping next to him in his bed, and second was a floating blue window congratulating him on becoming The Player and telling him to go work out as a daily quest. It seems being reincarnated as a devil had unlocked more than just Boosted Gear...

High School DxD x Solo Leveling

Issei x Harem

“Issei” Normal Speech.

‘*Issei*’ Normal Thought.

“**Ddraig**” Magic /Technique.

“**Jinwoo**” Demon/Monster Normal Speech.

‘***Jinwoo***’ Demon/Monster Thought.

Dragon Leveling

Chapter 51

A New Trial

“And three, two, one…”

Just as Aphrodite finished counting down, Issei emerged from the darkness that had swallowed the soldier he had stored within her shadow, returning to the comfort of her living room where he had been the morning of the day he had left for the Demon Castle. It only took him a fraction of a second to realize where he was, his gaze sweeping across the familiar surrounding before finally settling on Aphrodite, who sat on the couch near the tall windows of the room with a slight smile on her face.

“Hey, Aphrodite.” Issei said with a small grin “I’m back.”

“As you said you would, Ise.” Aphrodite nodded as she rose gracefully from her seat.

Before Issei could open his mouth to reply to her while glancing around, he caught the curious look in her eyes from the corners of his own, her head tilting slightly as she studied him in silence. After a couple of seconds, with Issei feeling a little self-conscious, Issei finally turned fully toward her and scratched the back of his head.

“Um, is there… something on my face?” He asked, leaning his head slightly back from her to look at his own reflection in the glass of the nearby window. He had, after all, just come back from fighting entire legions of demons and their king for a whole day straight without taking a single break. Even without any visible injuries, he knew he probably looked, and smelled, like shit.

Aphrodite smiled faintly, taking a slow step closer. “Oh no. Nothing like that.” she said, her gaze lingering on him as she hummed with a thoughtful smile “Hmm, I don’t know… there’s just something different about you, that’s all.”

“I mean…” Issei replied with a sheepish grin, feeling even more confused than he was before. After a moment, he finally opened his mouth to speak again, with the only, most logical answer he could come up. “I’m still the same Issei.”

“We’ll see.” Aphrodite said before a frown crossed over her face, making the smile on his face falter. “Anyway, we can talk more about that later. There’s something that you need to know, Ise.”

Half an hour later, after taking a hot shower and changing into a fresh pair of clothes because Aphrodite would not let him leave until he had done so, Issei found himself following her to Serafall Hospital in the Underworld to see Ingvild. Along the way, Aphrodite filled him in on everything that had happened in his absence, making sure Issei would know what to say in case anyone questioned him about it.

From having a handmaiden who was skilled at mimicking the mannerism of others disguised as him to visit Ingvild the first time a few days ago, as everyone knew he would rush back to check on her as soon as he heard her condition had worsened, to telling Azazel, someone who was skilled enough to see through the disguise, that he had been stuck inside a Red Gate during a Raid for Hephaestus… Aphrodite made sure every possible angle was perfectly accounted for, and logically to his personality. Even if he had foreseen what happened, Issei doubted he would have been able to handle it any better himself, so he was extremely grateful that Aphrodite had covered for him so thoroughly.

“You know… you don’t look as worried as I thought you would.” Aphrodite suddenly said as the two of them walked through the spacious halls of Serafall Hospital.

“I am?” Issei couldn’t help but ask, quickly reminding himself of how good Aphrodite was at reading others.

She wasn’t wrong, all things considered. Despite hearing that Ingvild’s condition was deteriorating and her sleep episodes were lengthening, Issei wasn't as worried as he might logically be. He wondered if his calmer feelings were due to the vials of the Elixir of Life stored in his Inventory.

Since their initial meeting, his primary motivation for conquering the Demon Castle had been to gather the necessary ingredients to craft the elixir capable of fully curing Ingvild of her mysterious illness. Despite her outward appearance of perfect health, Azazel had insisted she still harbored the ailment. Knowing that he now possessed the means to finally help her rid herself of the disease brought him a sense of calm that exceeded Issei's expectations.

But the more he thought about it, the less certain he started to feel. What if even the Elixir of Life could not cure the Sleep Disease? There was a reason Devil doctors and researchers had spent centuries searching for a cure, only for their efforts to end in

failure. That very thought lingered at the back of his mind as he kept following Aphrodite down the hall, his worry steadily growing despite his best attempts to reassure himself.

[Have faith, partner. The Elixir will work.] Ddraig said, making Issei smile a little and nod his head in response.

“Lady Aphrodite.” A doctor greeted when they finally arrived at Ingvild’s room, his head lowering respectfully to Aphrodite as she returned the gesture with a polite smile before turning to Issei to make the introduction.

“Ise, this is Doctor Malphas. He and Azazel are the ones overseeing Ingvild’s case.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.” Issei said, shaking the doctor’s hand when the man offered it to him along with a courteous smile and a slight bow of his head. Given his status as the Sekiryuutei and his growing popularity among the Devil Faction, it was clear the man already knew who he was.

Without wasting any more time, he asked. “How is Ingvild?”

“Leviathan-sama woke up not long ago.” Doctor Malphas replied. “However, her last sleep lasted almost a full day. Longer than any of the previous ones.”

The words made Issei nod slowly. “But she’s stable right now?”

“For the moment, yes.” Malphas answered in a softer tone. “But you should be prepared. The next time she passes out, she might succumb fully to the effects of the Sleep Disease. Her case has already been peculiar as it is, but you and your friends should be ready for that possibility.”

Issei drew in a slow breath before asking, “May I see her, sir?”

“Of course. It’s visiting hour, after all.” Malphas nodded before moving himself aside.

“Go on, Ise. I’m sure you two have a lot to talk about.” Aphrodite said with a warm smile as she moved toward the bench across from Ingvild’s room, making Issei smile at her gratefully before opening the door to make his way in.

Inside, Ingvild sat quietly on the hospital bed, her pale hair falling loosely over the white sheets. Her face looked peaceful, yet there was a new fragile quality about her. Surrounded by machines and monitoring devices that gently rose and fell with each steady breath, her eyes were open but unfocused, as if caught between sleep and wakefulness. The moment she heard the knock at the door, a wide smile broke across her face.

“Ise! Welcome back!” she said warmly.

Issei returned the smile as he walked inside after closing the door behind him. “Thanks, Ingvild. How are you feeling?”

“Much better already.” Ingvild replied, nodding lightly. Then her expression shifted, a hint of annoyance creeping in as she playfully huffed. “That said, I really hate hospitals, you know. I thought I was done with them, but I guess I’m starting to hate them all over again.”

Issei let out a quiet chuckle and walked over to her bed, sitting down beside her. “Yeah, I figured you would.” He said gently before holding out his hand, making a small vial filled with shimmering red liquid materialize between his fingers with a burst of energy before holding it out to Ingvild “Here. I have something for you.”

Ingvild stared down at the vial, her brows furrowing in curiosity for a moment before her eyes widened in realization.

“This is…”

“The Elixir of Life.” Issei nodded, smiling in confirmation.

“You did it? You cleared the Demon Castle?” Ingvild asked in bewilderment, making Issei nod his head again with an assuring smile.

“Well, it wasn’t easy. I had to fight a scary looking Demon King and all, but his blood is the final ingredient I need to craft this Elixir." Issei explained half-jokingly to lighten the mood before he added, “I promised you I would clear the Dungeon to make this Elixir for you, Ingvild. Here it is.”

For a second, she just stared at the vial again, hands trembling slightly as she reached out. “So, if I drink this…”

“It will cure you.” Issei replied with a grin. “No more hospitals.”

Ingvild swallowed, her grip tightening around the vial as she casted her gaze back at him and said quickly. “I mean… I’m really grateful, Ise, but I feel fine right now. Maybe I won’t fall asleep against my will again? Are we really sure we should use it already? Something like this is way too valuable for you. Rias-senpai even had a theory that maybe…”

“Ingvild. It’s fine," Issei said with a gentle chuckle. He looked at the lavender-haired girl with a warm smile and raised his other hand to summon another identical vial of the Elixir of Life, causing Ingvild to widen her eyes in surprise. “With some help from one of my shadows, I managed to craft seven vials in total using the ingredients from the

Demon Castle, so we have more than enough. You don’t need to worry," he assured her.

With that said, he moved the first vial closer to her, his tone gentle but certain. “This one’s for you. That has always been the point, from the moment that we met in Labyrinth.”

Ingvild stared at the vial for a moment longer before her gaze softened. Slowly, she reached out and took it from him, the smile on her face turning warm and sincere. “Thank you, Ise. Really.”

“Don’t mention it.” Issei answered with a grin, watching as Ingvild turned the vial in her fingers before carefully uncorking it and bringing it closer, taking a small sniff.

“Doesn’t smell like it’ll taste bad at all. For sure better than the medicines the nurses have been giving me.” She noted, a hint of surprise in her voice before she asked “Is there anything I should know before I drink it?”

“I’m pretty sure you’ll need to drink the whole thing for it to work.” Issei answered.

Ingvild nodded in response, then lifted the vial without further hesitation and drank the whole thing down in one go. She swallowed, then let out a small breath as she set the empty vial aside.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

She blinked once, then frowned slightly. “I… honestly don’t really feel any different.” she admitted, sounding more puzzled and curious than disappointed.

“Hold on. I can check," Issei said quickly, activating Observe as his gaze silently scanned her. Moments later, his expression changed, and the tension he had felt earlier finally eased as he observed the result.

The permanent **Sleep Disease** debuff was gone.

He looked back at her, a slow smile spreading across his face.

“Yeah. You’re cured, Ingvild.”

And that was all she needed to hear, fully trusting in Issei. Before he could say anything else, Ingvild had leaned toward and pressed a kiss to his cheek, leaving Issei frozen for a second.

[!] Your bond with Ingvild Leviathan has deepened.

[!] Your Pact with Ingvild Leviathan (Water) has leveled up (Level 5).

All associated abilities have leveled up!

[!] New Pact Ability with Ingvild Leviathan Unlocked

Dragon Rift: Use to summon your Pact Dragon to your side. Cooldown: 24 hour.

Mana Cost: None.

A series of notifications flashed before his eyes, making Issei widen them in awe. The messages lingered for a moment before fading away, and when his focus returned, he found himself smiling even wider as he turned back to Ingvild.

“Thank you, Ise.” She said, smiling brightly.

Issei could only laugh softly in response, feeling a sense of pride swelling in his chest as he grinned. “You’re welcome.”

For a brief moment, a comfortable silence settled between them before Ingvild glanced toward the door, her smile turning a little sheepish.

“So… how exactly are we going to explain this to the doctors?”

It was only then that Issei realized he hadn’t thought about that problem at all.

DRAGON LEVELING

Unfortunately, because of Ingvild’s worsening condition and Issei’s absence throughout the ordeal, they ended up completely missing the School Festival. It wasn’t much of an

issue, however, as Rias had decided to withdraw her club entirely from the event, much to the disappointment of the rest of the school.

As Issei anticipated, the news of Ingvild's complete and "mysterious" cure of the Sleep Disease caused a commotion among the doctors at Serafall Hospital and rapidly circulated throughout the Underworld. Experts were summoned, tests were conducted repeatedly, but despite numerous examinations, no evidence of the disease remained, and Ingvild was regarded as completely healthy by all standards.

Before long, the public began calling it the “Blessing of the Old Maou”, believing her miracle recovery from the incurable disease was tied to her lineage as a descendant of the original Leviathan. It was an explanation that satisfied most, especially those who still supported and followed the ideals of the old Maou. Some even began using it as leverage, claiming that she had cured herself of the Sleep Disease, making Ingvild leagues above the devils of this generation, the current Four Maou included, and pushing a position of authority for her.

Issei’s only real concern in the days that followed was that doctors and specialists continued to pester Ingvild for more information even after she had been discharged from the hospital. Fortunately, that abruptly stopped one day, and Issei later learned it was thanks to Zekram Bael himself intervening. In the end, Ingvild still had to provide a

blood sample, though Zekram made sure that Azazel was the only one permitted access to it.

From what Issei had heard so far from their chemistry teacher, he couldn't find anything unusual in her blood, so the chance of him discovering the Elixir of Life was non-existed. That was what turned the situation so morally troubling for him. There were many devils suffering from the same disease Ingvild had endured, and as much as he wanted to help, Issei knew he only had fix vials left. The choice of who to save and who to turn away weighed heavily on him, a responsibility Issei quickly realized he wasn't ready to face, yet one he knew he could not avoid forever. Issei did plan to tell Azazel about the Elixir and even considered giving him one to attempt to reverse-engineer it, but he doubted the man could accomplish much without the original ingredients.

At best, it would probably yield nothing. At worst, it would waste a vial Issei knew he might need in the near future.

And so, before Issei even realized it, several days had passed since his return from the Demon Castle, which was now ruled by the Radiru Clan, who had shown him the statue they had built in his honor during the celebration banquet that Issei didn't forget to attend.

“Cid, may I come in?” Issei called as he pushed open the door to the Hero Faction HQ office. “I heard you were looking for me.”

Cid glanced up from behind his desk, a lit cigarette held loosely between his lips. There were two empty cups of coffee on his desk, next to two tall stacks of files and a faint haze of smoke lingering in the room. Despite the tired look in his eyes, his expression brightened the moment he saw Issei.

“Yeah, yeah, come in, lad.” Cid said, waving him inside. “Good timing, actually. Take a seat.”

Issei stepped in and closed the door behind him, taking the chair across from the desk. Once he had settled, Cid leaned back in his own seat, exhaled slowly, then stubbed out the cigarette before picking up a tablet from the desk to swipe his fingers repeatedly across the screen.

“Here, lad. Take a look at this.” Cid said before turning the screen toward him. The screen displayed a detailed chart with multiple overlapping lines, all climbing sharply over the past several days.

It wasn’t that difficult for Issei to figure out what chart this was.

“I won’t sugarcoat it, but it’s getting much, much worse than before.”

Cid said, making Issei nod his head in understanding. As far as he could tell from the chart, not only had Gates been appearing more frequently, but their overall difficulty had also spiked sharply, with more and more B to A rank Gates opening all across the world. The number of Gates turning Red had risen again as well, and Dungeon Breaks were starting to occur much earlier than usual.

The first S-rank Gate in two years had also appeared in America last week, just after he had left for the Demon Castle. Thankfully, it had been raided and cleared by the National Level Hero, Thomas Andre, along with his Hero Guilds.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Issei asked, finally looking up from the screen.

Cid answered by reaching to the pile on his left, pulling out a thick stack of files and sliding them across the desk toward him. “These are the official requests specifically for your assistance that I’ve received over the past three days. Our branches in China, Russia, England, Germany… even the Middle East. They all want you to come in and assist, fully trusting that you can cover far more ground than any raid party thanks to your abilities. We’ve already been stretched thin, and you’re one of the only people in the world who could singlehandedly take care of every single operation of a Raid on your own. Hell, if even half the stories about you are true, you’ve been doing exactly that since day one.”

“So I talked to Sirzechs, and we have come to the decision to let you solo-raid.” Cid continued after a brief pause, leaning forward from his chair as Issei widened his eyes in surprise, all the while feeling no less excited. “From now on, you don’t have to worry about standard raid protocols anymore. You pick the Gates you think are within your capabilities, and deal with them as you see fit.”

“You’re serious?”

“This isn’t something I’d say lightly, lad, but right now, we don’t have many options left to consider. More than that, I have a feeling you’re our best answer to this whole mess, and I’ve learned to trust my gut.” Cid answered, his tone light but firm. “This also means you’ll be working overtime. You’ll probably be kept busy at least until this whole crisis dies down, but I don’t think that’ll be a problem for you, is it?”

“No. Of course not.” Issei answered without hesitation.

“That’s the spirit.” Cid chuckled, giving him a small nod.

A gentle knock sounded at the door. Instead of replying immediately, Cid continued talking as the door swung open and someone entered. “There’s still the question of whether you can handle a Raid alone. I believe this is a pointless exercise since I have been there with you before and seen how you roll, but the other branch leaders want a

detailed report on your approach to a solo raid. Therefore, I must assign someone to oversee your first attempt."

"Cid, I heard you wanted to…"

Hearing that, Issei finally turned around to look at the newcomer, forcing a small, awkward smile when he saw that it was none other than Fukuda Yamato, the eccentric instructor he had met during the Hero Entrance Exam.

"Ah! You're that Red Dragon Emperor brat!" Fukuda exclaimed dramatically, pointing a finger straight at Issei, who snorted before replying.

"Good to see you again, Fukuda-sensei."

"Perfect timing, Fukuda-sensei. We were just talking about you." Cid said with a small chuckle, gesturing toward the empty chair beside Issei. "Come in and take a seat. I have a small task for you."

"What is it then?" the middle-aged instructor asked as he settled into the chair.

"Oh, nothing much. I want you to follow Issei and observe his first official solo raid to judge whether or not he's capable of handling it. I'll be expecting a full report, and I want it to be as detailed as possible."

Fukuda blinked once… then crossed his arms over his chest and nodded smugly.

“Hmm, looks like the rumors weren’t exaggerating after all. As expected from a young, blossoming talent who became a hero under my guidance.”

He said proudly, making Issei turn slowly back to Cid and exchange a look with the man.

With a small chuckle, the Hero leader then addressed Issei. “I don’t think I need to tell you this, and I highly doubt that someone as capable as Fukuda-sensei would need the reminder, but I trust you can ensure his safety as well, lad? After all, it’s the raid leader’s job to make sure everyone in his party walks out alive.”

“Of course, Cid.” Issei replied.

Cid nodded in satisfaction. “Good. Then it’s settled.” He leaned back in his chair, exhaling slowly through his nose. “I’ll arrange the paperwork and clearances today. It shouldn’t take too much time, but once that’s done, you’ll be free to move as you see fit. If there’s anything else you need, feel free to ask.”

“Actually… yeah. There is something I was wondering if we could arrange.”

Issei said after a brief pause, giving it a moment of thought before making up his mind.

DRAGON LEVELING

“So this is it, huh?”

Rias asked with a small smile as she looked at the enormous Gate looming before her and Issei, which had opened in a residential district within Astaroth territory in the Underworld.

Typically, the Devil Household controlling the area where a Gate appears would claim full rights over it. However, with Diodora deceased and trust in the Astaroth family nearly lost, all responsibility was now assigned to the Gremory household. This shift was due to their involvement in his defeat during the Khaos Brigade terrorist attack at the Youth Devil Rating Game Tournament. The Crimson Emporium had initially planned to raid it themselves, but Issei contacted Zeoticus directly and persuaded him to let him take on the task himself as his first official solo raid.

To say that the current Gremory head had been delighted to hear the news was an understatement, at least until Issei added that he wanted Rias to come along. Zeoticus and his wife had not been thrilled in the slightest, because the Gate was an A-rank, incredibly difficult and dangerous even for a proper Raid team. However, Issei had

assured them no harm would come her way, and promised to pull her out the moment the situation showed any sign of going awry.

“Nervous?” Issei asked with a small smile.

“Kinda. Usually, everyone starts with a D or C-rank Gate. An A-rank is a huge leap, even for a full Peerage.” Rias said.

“Yeah… Kinda wish everyone could have come along, but it also wouldn’t be much of a solo raid for me if they did. I need to do this with a team as small as possible so Fukuda-sensei can make that report.” Issei pointed out. Among the other members of the Peerage, Akeno was the only one who could have come along with him and Rias, having recently passed her Middle Class Promotion Exam.

As much as Issei had wanted to invite her, she’s still waiting for her Mid-rank certificate. Only after receiving it and getting some paperwork done that Akeno was allowed to participate in a Raid.

Next time though, he would invite her to come along for sure.

“Speaking of…”

Issei then said and turned his head to the side to look at the crowd of devils and reporters standing on the other side of the perimeter that had been set up by the handful of Emporium employees Zeoticus had sent to assist them with the crowd control matter. Camera flashes went off intermittently from the front row of paparazzi as murmurs spread through the onlookers, many of them watching with a mix of curiosity and excitement as they waved cheering signs over their heads for both Rias and Issei.

“Fukuda-sensei!” Issei called to the Hero Instructor, who was doing some last minute check to his gears nearby, earning his attention. “I thought the information of this Raid is kept confidential.”

“It is, but there wasn’t much anyone could do about the Gate itself, was there?” Fukuda replied, gesturing casually toward the area around them. “And correct me if I’m wrong, but you and little missy there are pretty famous around here in the Underworld. You kinda have to expect that every move you make is bound to draw attention from the public for one reason or another.”

“He’s right, Ise.” Rias agreed with a small laugh, prompting Issei to shrug in resignation.

“Is everything set?” Fukuda then asked as he walked over to them. “By the way, I know Cid said you could handle the Raid all by yourself, and I don’t doubt your strength, but why not at least hire a retrieval or mining team?”

“It’ll be fine. These guys will handle those operations.”

Issei said as he gestured a thumb over his shoulder. The crowd in the distance erupted into gasps and excited shouts as a formation of twenty troopers emerged from his shadow, their dark figures and aura standing in stark contrast to the harsh light spilling out from the Gate before them. The soldiers moved into position beside Rias as she gestured toward the carts of mining tools and other necessities for a standard Raid.

‘Unbelievable…’ Fukuda thought in disbelief as he looked at the mana-meter in his hand after scanning it over one of the troopers *‘All of these summons are as strong as an average A-rank Gate monster. The kid easily exceeds the requirement for this Raid even with just ten of them.’*

“Ise, do we split them up into retrieval and mining teams?” Rias asked as she handed a few troopers their pickaxes.

“Yep. Ten for each team. I can summon more to handle transportation if we need them,” Issei said with a nod, giving Rias a thumbs-up before finally stepping toward the Gate.

He paused just before crossing through, turning back to Fukuda with a small grin. “Try to keep up, sensei.”

“Keep up? You brat! Who do you think…”

DRAGON LEVELING.

“…”

As the Raid carried on, moving into the fifteenth minute, Fukuda was left completely speechless, his face drained of all of its colors as he watched the brutal, one-sided slaughter unfolding before him. The monsters within the Gate were humanoid beasts whose bodies had long since rotted away, little more than vessels controlled by insect-type creatures that burrowed within them, the true threat of the dungeon, which had the layout of a large, standard cave.

But even with all of the relentlessness, their enhanced strength and acidic attacks, none of them even stood a chance against the Shadow Army. Limbs were torn away, torsos crushed, and bodies split open as the shadows tore into them. Some shadows grabbed the parasites directly, tearing them free from their hosts and ending them in a single attack, while others simply shattered the bodies outright, destroying both vessel and controller at once. In the process, acidic blood splashed against their armor and

weapons, hissing uselessly as the troopers as the shadows instantly regenerated and continued to push forward without slowing.

Near the entrance of the Gate, a group of troopers diligently carved into the dungeon walls, extracting clusters of mana stones with their pickaxes. Each shadowed worker moved like a well-oiled machine. Once a deposit was exhausted, the stones were promptly handed off to the retrieval team, who carried all valuables, including essence stones from monster corpses and the monsters' carcasses, out of the dungeon. Nothing was wasted, and the entire process flowed smoothly without direct commands from Issei, who watched Rias battling two monsters with her Power of Destruction. His shadows had isolated them from the rest, eliminating the first monster and its insects before they could crawl out and escape.

“Hey, hey. Try to hold back a little, will you?” Issei called out with an amused chuckle as Rias erased the existence of another monster with a sphere of destructive energy, testing new ways to refine her control of her demonic power. “You know better than anyone how much those monster corpses are worth. Completely erasing them is just lightening our pockets later.”

“Hey, don’t blame me for how my power works.” Rias shot back playfully, earning a grin from Issei.

‘This is ridiculous… no wonder why everyone said he could handle a raid on his own. He could just stand back and chill like this while his summons handle the raid for him.’

Fukuda thought in bewilderment as he watched the exchange between the couple before casting his gaze over to the shadow named Gladio, who stood out even among the unique shadows he had been paying attention to. With what seemed like a single swing of his broad blade, Gladio tore through an entire horde of rotten beasts, sending their bodies collapsing into pieces as delayed flashes of light revealed the true speed of his attacks, erasing both the hosts and the insects controlling them in the same instant.

‘That Knight… he’s an entire league above the standard troopers. A-rank… no, he has to be at least S-rank.’ Fukuda thought, a nervous sheen of sweat sliding down the side of his face.

Lost in his thoughts, he failed to notice the grotesque, spider-like carcass that had been tossed at his feet until one of its legs suddenly twitched. Fukuda flinched and jumped back, snapping his head up to glare at Asterius. The Shadow Minotaur responded with a wide, unapologetic smirk, flexing the muscles of his left arm before turning away and charging back into the fight alongside his partner, Vulcan, the two brutes tearing a path of utter destruction across the cavern with their heavy battle axes.

“Rias.” Issei suddenly called out, grabbing his girlfriend by the waist and pulling her back as an ominous presence surged from the far end of the cavern.

The ground trembled as the monster finally revealed itself, a massive, misshapen beast whose movements were jerky and unnatural. Where its head should have been was a grotesque, spider-like creature, its many eyes twitching independently as thick strands of organic matter tethered it to the neck of its host. Across the poor creature’s bloated torso, swollen bulges shifted beneath the surface, with smaller insects crawling inside its flesh and forcing sudden, uneven spasms through its limbs while faint skittering sounds echoed from every spot of its body.

“Ugh…” Rias winced in disgust as she stood behind Issei, who smiled and summoned Boosted Gear before drawing Crimson Throne from his Inventory with a burst of energy. “Ise, this sword…”

“Something I picked up in the Gate I raided for Lord Hephaestus.” He replied with a small smile before turning his full attention back to the towering monster. “All of you, except for the mining and retrieval teams, return to me.”

At his command, his shadows dissolved into black wisps that quickly streamed back toward Issei and sunk into his shadow with Gladio lowering his blade and vanishing last after he had cut down the last enemies.

“Aegis, watch over Rias for me.” Issei commanded as Aegis raised from his shadow before walking over to Rias with his head bowing slightly.

“Why did you cancel your other summons?” Fukuda asked as he turned his gaze to Issei “They should be strong enough to defeat the boss.”

“If I rely too much on my shadows, my skill would become rusty, you know.” Issei answered, resting the Crimson Throne on his shoulder as arcs of red lightning crackled along the blade. “Plus, I gotta give you something about me to write on that report.”

[Pact Siwtch] Y Ddraig Goch (Fire) -> Rassei (Lightning)

With that said and a burst of yellow, lightning infused mana, Issei surged forward, closing the distance with the boss of the Gate in an instance before leaping into the air to avoid the colossal fist that descended toward him, colliding with the ground with devastating force. Before the monster could react, his eyes locked onto the monster that formed its head and slashed his blade skyward, splitting it cleanly in half.

[Boost!]

As Issei spun around and descended behind the monster without slowing, an enormous, devastating trail of crimson lightning erupted violently from his swing, surging through the colossal body of the rotten beast. The insects hidden within were struck all at once, reduced to nothing but ashes as the massive form stiffened before collapsing, its unnatural movements finally ending as the cavern fell silent save for the rhythmic sound of pickaxe splitting mana stone from the wall.

“Well, that was easy.” Issei exhaled as he turned his head around to look at the defeated monster, making sure that no more insects were lurking around before looking over to Rias to give her the signal that it was safe to approach. Next to her, Fukuda’s face was comically pale as a ghost, his hands hanging limply at his side as his mind continued to try processing what he had just witnessed.

“Ise, that was amazing!” Rias praised as she ran to his side, making Issei grin at her before storing Crimson Throne away into his Inventory.

“Thanks.” Issei answered with a grin before casting his gaze back to the monster corpse “I guess this corpse is too damaged to be worth anything?”

“We still got a high quality essence stone, at least.” Rias noted as she removed a golden essence stone from the rotten corpse before standing back up to ask Issei “You’re not gonna try bringing it back, Ise?”

“No. These hosts seem to have been dead for way too long. And I’m not reviving these disgusting insects.” Issei said, holding up his hands.

Not that he could even if he wanted to. For some reason, there was no notification that the creatures were extractable. Even the demons in the Demon Castle had at least displayed notifications that their mana was corrupted and thus their shadows were unextractable.

“So, Fukuda-sensei, do you think that’s…”

“I… uh, I’m going to take my leave now, if that’s alright with you two.” Fukuda cut in before Issei could finish asking whether he had gathered enough material for his report, leaving him and Rias unable to do anything else but stand there and watch as he turned sharply on his heels and exited the Gate without saying another word.

After he had left, the two exchanged a brief look before sharing a laugh.

“Well, let’s pack things up here and leave. The Gate should be closing soon.” Issei said, making Rias nod her head in response. With that, the remaining shadows quickly

finished their tasks, clearing out the last valuable materials and transporting the final loads outside before heading back inside. One by one, the mining and retrieval teams returned to Issei, dissolving back into his shadow as the Gate approached its closure.

Hand in hand, Issei and Rias crossed over the destabilizing mass of swirling energy, leaving the Gate to seal itself behind them.

And that was when a strange sensation washed over him.

Issei and Rias widened their eyes in surprise when the sounds of shouting, magic exploding and clashing hit their ears. In a blink, the two found themselves standing not in the spacious, but rather crowded residential district of Astaroth territory in the Underworld, but the familiar setting of Kuoh Town, with both of them taking only a second to realize that. Spells streaked through the air, explosions rocked the ground, and numerous devils were locked in brutal combat with hulking, wolf-like beasts that tore through the streets on all fours or rose up to strike with claws and fangs.

“Wha… what’s going on?” Rias blurted out in a mix of shock and confusion, only for Issei to shove her back a split second later as a werewolf lunged at them from behind. Before it could react, Issei had spun around and delivered a devastating kick to the side

of its face, breaking its skull and neck so suddenly it could barely muster a whimper before its body went limp and collapsed.

“Rias, are you…”

“Go!” Rias said quickly after regaining her footing, her expression hardening as she scanned the battlefield. “Go! They need your help.”

And that was all Issei needed to act. Crimson Thorne flared into his hand in a crackle of crimson lightning as he turned and surged forward. The moment his foot hit the ground, lightning exploded beneath him as he activated **Lightning Rush**, his body blurring into a trail of spirit lightning as he dashed straight into the thick of the battle, cutting down every monster in his path. Devils caught on the defensive barely had time to register what was happening before their attackers were struck down, crimson lightning trailing behind Issei like a violent afterimage as he weaved through the streets.

Soon enough, Issei spotted the Sitri Peerage fighting further ahead. Sona and servants had formed a rough defensive line, magic barriers flickering as they protected a group of nervous townspeople against a relentless wave of werewolves. Without hesitation, Issei turned himself toward that direction, allowing a burst of lightning to carry him straight into the fray, his blade flashing as he cut through a werewolf and then allowed spirit

lightning to chain to the monsters standing nearby with **Electrospark**, striking them down with pained howls.

“Saji-kun!”

As Issei struck down another werewolf, he heard Momo of the Sitri Peerage cry out. Turning toward the sound, he saw one of the creatures forcing its way through a weakening barrier and lunging straight at Saji, who was trying to shield nearby civilians from another werewolf he had just brought down. Its claws came down in a wide arc as the Sitri Pawn raised his Sacred Gear to block, only for Issei to quickly move between them and intercept it mid-strike before taking it down in a single strike of his blade.

“On your feet, Saji.” Issei said as he spun around and grabbed Saji’s arm to haul him back on his feet.

“Thanks, Hyoudou… wait, who—” Saji started gratefully, but then blinked in surprise. Before the question could fully leave his mouth, Issei was already on the move again, leaving only scorched ground and fallen werewolves in his wake.

As Issei continued to dash across the streets of Kuoh, his eyes suddenly caught a familiar flash of crimson in the distance.

It was Rias. She was being pushed back near a collapsed street corner, several werewolves closing in from multiple sides as she unleashed bursts of demonic power to keep them at bay.

When did she…

Issei didn't even have time to think, his body instinctively as he vanished from his position, the air cracking violently in his wake as he shot toward her as fast as his speed could carry him. Crimson lightning tore through the street as Issei tore through the group surrounding Rias. His blade flashed once, then again, each strike cutting down a werewolf before it could even turn, their bodies hitting the ground almost simultaneously as Issei cut them all down without mercy.

In seconds, it was over.

Issei skidded to a stop beside Rias, lightning fading from his blade as he turned to her and asked gently. "You okay?"

But to his surprise, Issei was met with a puzzled look from his girlfriend. Rias stared at him with clear confusion, her brows knitting together as she took a cautious step back before finally speaking, her voice uncertain.

"Who… are you?"

“Wha… what do you mean, who am I?” Issei asked, genuinely taken aback. “It’s me…”

“Hey, you! Get away from Buchou!”

The shout came sharp and hostile, with Issei reacting instantly, springing backward just as a figure crashed down between him and Rias, the impact cracking the ground beneath their feet. Dust billowed upward, and when it cleared, Issei froze when he saw that the figure standing protectively in front of his girlfriend was cladded in the same red Boosted Gear Scale Mail that he had, with the gauntlet being identical to his own.

“…Who are you!?” Issei demanded when he finally found his voice, disbelief creeping into his voice as he looked around and found the rest of the Gremory Peerage gathering around them, all looking at him with a mixture of confusion, slight recognition, but cautious.

The armored figure straightened, before the visor opened up, revealing a face beneath that left Issei completely speechless.

It was a face that was almost identical to his own. Their hairstyle was different, but their faces had the same features. Same eye colors. Same expression that twisted into anger as they glared at each other.

“What do you mean, who am I?” The other Issei snapped. “I’m the real Issei Hyoudou, you damn cheap-ass impostor. What the hell were you trying to do to Buchou?”

“Impostor? You’re the damn impostor here, you bastard!” Issei shot back, barely keeping his anger in check as he glanced toward the others. “Guys, what are you doing? Kiba. It’s me. I’m…”

[Partner, wait!] Ddraig suddenly called out, his voice echoing from the Boosted Gear and making Issei freeze mid-sentence while his near identical twin and the Gremory Peerage looked at the gauntlet in shock **[Something’s not right. I can sense another…]**

“Ise!”

Before Ddraig could finish, a familiar voice called out. Issei turned his head to see Rias flying toward them, relief clear on her face as she smiled at him until she landed at his side. The color drained from her expression as her gaze shifted past him and toward the other Rias Gremory, who met her gaze with the same look of disbelief.

For a long moment, no one spoke as the two Rias stared at each other, because unlike the two Issei, they were exactly identical.

End of Chapter 51