Leap Year: June-August

by BlinkFl0yd

Summary

Spirit Albarn has a problem—he and his four-year-old daughter Maka need to find suitable roommates to keep the little apartment they call home after their previous ones moved out. And eventually they do, in the forms of Spirit’s ninja-wannabe coworker Sid Barrett, blonde kickboxer Marie Mjolnir, and micromanager corporate princess Azusa Yumi. Add in Sid’s paranormal-obsessed foster sister Mira Nygus, and they’re in business. Then Marie reveals she’s pregnant, and that the father is none other than Spirit’s ex-best friend from high school Stein, who’s been in a psychiatric prison for the past few years for rearranging Spirit’s insides. Despite their history however, Spirit can’t bring himself to turn them away.

This is just the beginning of their problems.

Notes

Sooo, at some point I decided "fuck it," and made Leap Year into a series. A three-part series to be exact, because there are fifteen chapters and the temptation of having exactly five chapters per part was too much to resist.

Thank you everyone for your patience, comments, and kudos, and I hope you all stick around until this monster is finished. <3
Spirit Albarn had a problem.

Well, multiple problems actually, if he were to be honest. For one, he had six library books overdue. For another, a colony of ants kept breaking out in his bathroom, and no matter what he did to get rid of them they still wouldn’t (ha) bug off. His beautiful, talented, and amazing four-year-old daughter Maka was starting preschool in three months, and he was not ready in the slightest. And finally, he was interviewing for an internship in two weeks, a pretty well-coveted internship that he would honestly sell his soul for because it could guarantee him a well-paying job after graduation, a job that would enormously improve his and Maka’s financial situation.

But his most pressing issue at the moment was that he needed to find at least two (preferably three) roommates before the end of the month. If he didn’t, he and Maka would pretty much screwed.

Which sucked, because for a while their living situation had been pretty stable. He and Maka had been bouncing around apartments ever since her mother had gone off to Harvard, mainly due to their financial situation. The monthly check Kami’s parents sent them helped more than he liked to admit, but it wasn’t really enough. Several jobs later and they’d manage to settle into an apartment where the rent was significantly better that what they had been dealing with before, but only if they were sharing it with at least two other people.

So for a while, it had been smooth sailing. Then out of the blue Joe and the other guys were all moving out at once to do whatever they were doing, which meant that Spirit had to find some replacement roommates fast.

"Papa, you said this wouldn't take a while." Maka's little fingers tugged at the edge of his coat. They stood in the park as Spirit struggled with a borrowed staple gun to get the last of his 'Roommate Wanted' posters up for people to see. There weren't many other people in the park as it was, aside from the occasional passerby and two kids on the nearby swingset, likely due to the ever-notorious June Gloom weather.

"I know, I know, this is the last one I promise." The staple gun slammed its way through the paper and into the bulletin board. "Okay, let's get going." Spirit tried to step back to take Maka's hand, only to realize one of the staples had gone through his sleeve, effectively pinning it to the board.

Fuck.

"It looks like it's going to rain," Maka observed. "The clouds are dark, see?"

"Yes, I see the clouds." Spirit tugged at his sleeve and swore under his breath. How the hell had he done that? Maybe if he just tugged hard enough it would come free...

A drop of water landed on his wrist. It was followed by another, than two more and then there were raindrops beginning to drizzle throughout the park.

Awesome.

Maka sighed, pulling her hood over her head and hugging her arms to her chest. “It’s raining.”

“I know.” Spirit jerked his hand back over and over, but it was becoming increasingly clear that the staples were stronger than they should be and he couldn’t pull his sleeve out without tearing the fabric.
"I'm cold," Maka whined. "I want to go home."

"Here." With his free hand he unwound the scarf around his neck and handed it to Maka. "Go ahead and wrap up in this, okay? We'll head home in a minute, Papa just needs to-uh..."

Crap. What was he going to do? Maybe he could pick out the staple with his free hand?

Maka frowned as she took the scarf. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sweetie! Just sit tight for a minute okay?"

"Okay." Maka wound the scarf around her neck.

"Hey Spirit!"

Spirit gave a start at the familiar voice. “Sid! Hey!”

“What are you doing? It’s starting to rain.” Sid had his work uniform on, which probably meant that he was on his way to a shift at the restaurant both he and Spirit worked at. He was carrying quite possibly the biggest red umbrella Spirit had ever seen in his life. Though considering the big fat droplets that were gradually replacing the tiny sprinkles of rain, the umbrella was actually probably a good idea.

“Hi Sid.” Maka’s shivering was horribly prominent now, as she huddled against Spirit’s side. “Can we stand under your umbrella? Papa didn’t bring ours.”

“That was dumb of him,” Sid remarked, taking a step closer to them so that the width of the umbrella covered all three of them.

“Thanks,” Spirit muttered, partially out of gratitude for the umbrella and the rest out of sarcasm towards the barb. “Can you give me a hand here?”

“With what?”

“I was putting this up and one of the staples went through my sleeve,” Spirit grumbled. “I can’t pick it out with one hand.”

Sid peered forward. “How the hell did you do that?”

“Bad word,” Maka chided, pointing her little finger at him from behind Spirit’s coat and shooting Sid a stern glare.

“Sorry,” Sid apologized.

“I don’t know,” Spirit responded miserably.

Sid snorted. “Your staple gun should have a remover on the back of it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Here, switch.”

Sid took the staple gun from Spirit and replaced it with the oversized umbrella, flipping it around and pointing to a triangular, metal prong on the end of it.

“Ohhhh! ...I knew that."
“Want me to get it out for you?” Sid asked with a snicker.

“I got it,” Spirit grumbled, handing the umbrella towards him again. “Switch.”

“Whatever you say.” Sid took the offered umbrella and handed back the staple gun. “Still no luck finding roommates, huh?”

“Yeah,” Spirit admitted.

“Not much longer left,” Maka added gloomily.

Spirit would’ve ruffled her hair reassuringly, but he couldn’t get the remover-thingie on the back of staple gun underneath the staple. “We’ll figure it out, kiddo.”

“Where’s your apartment?” Sid asked. “Is it close to the restaurant?”

“Yeah, about a block down.”

“Down that way,” Maka added, pointing across the park.

“Yeah.” Spirit finally got it under the staple, but when he pulled at it it wouldn’t come free.

“Huh.” Sid looked contemplative. “Y’know, I’ve been trying to find an apartment closer to work. I live all the way on the edge of town, and it’s a pain taking the bus so far every day.”

“You don’t drive?” Spirit asked, gritting his teeth and yanking as hard as he could. He felt the staple loosen, but it still wasn’t free. *Geez, how strong are these things?*

“Nope. Don’t like it.” Sid shrugged. “But since your place is apparently walking distance, I might be interested in moving in.”

Spirit gave a final tug and finally he was freed. “Yes!” Then Sid’s words sank in. “Wait. Really?”

“Yup.”

“Yes!” Spirit whooped. “Maka, hear that?”

“Uh huh!” Maka looked absolutely ecstatic, but quickly frowned. “But...Sid’s only one person. We need two.”

“Do you have any more flyers?” Sid asked. “I could put some up at the gym, try to get more people.”

“Not on me, but back at the apartment I do. Do you have time before work so we can grab you some? You can get the grand tour too.”

“I have fifteen minutes.”

“Good enough!”

“No it isn’t-”

“Yes it is! Come on!”

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Sid owned a bit more than Spirit did, which meant that helping him move in took up a good portion of the day. Unfortunately, the elevator was broken, which meant they had to carry
everything, more specifically the extremely heavy mattress and couch up a flight of stairs. Maka cheered them on as they went, giving them a round of applause when they finally got both the mattress and the couch in the apartment.

“We have a couch again!” Maka crawled over the back of it and flopped down to sit on it. “We don’t have to read on the floor!”

“You don’t have a lot of stuff, huh?” Sid asked, watching her with some amusement.

“Not really,” Spirit admitted. All he really had of value were two mattresses (one for him and a smaller one for Maka), his laptop, a cell phone, his mother’s crucifix, and a bunch of books. “We had furniture, but most of it was Joe’s, including the couch. He took all of it when he left.”

“Harsh.”

“Well, it was a nice couch, I can’t really blame him. And he did give me one of his coffee makers.”

“One of his coffee makers?”

Spirit laughed. “He had like ten.”

“Eleven,” Maka corrected, already bored and flipping open her book.

“Seriously?” Sid asked, looking amused.

“And I’m not actually sure if he gave it to me or if he just forgot it here,” Spirit admitted. “Either way, he’s not getting it back.”

“Good. Because mine broke.” Sid flopped down next to Maka on the couch.

Spirit couldn’t help but grin. He still had two roommates to go and only three days left, but he felt ridiculously happy over the fact that they were finally making progress.

The next day, when Spirit had just started stressing over the issue again, Sid told him he might have found a new possibility.

“Her name’s Marie Mjolnir,” Sid told him, sliding him the number. “I talked to her today, and she seems pretty on board, she just has some questions about power bills and stuff like that.”

“Her?” Spirit immediately perked up with interest.

“Don’t get any ideas. She has a boyfriend. And aren’t you still with Maka’s mother?”

“I know, I know.” Spirit reassured him, quickly. “Still, is she cute?”

“Cute and terrifying,” Sid grumbled. “She’s tiny and blonde and she kicked my ass in like five seconds when I sparred with her.”

“Wow,” Spirit said dreamily

“She has an eyepatch too.”

“Whoa, really?”

“Yup. It’s pretty cool-looking.” Sid gave him a stern look. “I mean it. Don’t get any ideas.”
“I know, I know, I was joking.” Spirit paused, thoughtfully. “What’s her boyfriend like though?”

“Just call her.” Sid tapped the slip of paper in front of him irritably before leaving.

“I will!” Spirit picked up his phone to dial the number, rolling his eyes. “Jeez.”

Marie didn’t answer when he called, so he left her a voicemail. That night, after he’d gotten home from his shift and picked Maka up from where Blair was watching her, he got a call back.

“Is this Spirit?” She had a nice, soft sounding voice, sweet as honey.

“Yep, I take it this is Marie?” he asked.

“That’s me! Are you calling about the apartment? Sid did tell you I’m interested, right?”

“He did. And he also told me that you had some questions about the apartment?”

“Yeah, the one I have right now is awful. The landlord’s a huge jerk, the neighbors are terrible, and I have trouble paying bills every month, which is seriously stressful.”

“That sucks.” Spirit could definitely relate to that. One of the first apartments he’d lived in with Maka was awful in almost exactly the same ways. “You won’t have any trouble with that here, I can assure you.”

“That sounds awesome.” Marie said, sounding relieved. “Sid gave me one of the flyers, but I have some more questions if you have the time.”

“Absolutely. What do you want to know?”

From that they delved into a conversation about electricity bills and rent and other boring topics that Spirit hated but had to deal with because he was an adult or whatever. Spirit tentatively brought up Maka, knowing that most college students didn’t particularly want to live with a four year old (he’d had trouble with that in previous apartments too), but much to his relief Marie assured him she was fine with it and that she loved kids. They were wrapping it up after they scheduled a day for her to drop by and see the apartment, when Spirit heard a hissed voice on the other end of the line.

“Is that the guy with an apartment for rent?”

“Uh-huh, he says-”

“Let me talk to him.”

“Okay- Spirit, this is my friend Azusa.”

“Oh- okay?” Spirit managed before he heard the phone being handed off and another voice came on the line.

“Hello. You’re Spirit Albarn?”

The contrast between the sweet, bubbly voice to the sharp, business-like tone was abrupt and had Spirit a bit taken aback for a moment before he recovered. “That’s me.”

“I’m Azusa Yumi. Marie says you have a room available for rent?”

“Yeah.” Could this...be another potential roommate? No, there was no way he was that lucky. He
was never that lucky.

“Well, Marie says that you need more than one roommate and I was wondering if that still applied.”

Holy shit. Stay cool, stay cool. Internally, however, he was jumping for joy. “Uh- yes. Yes it does.”
Are you interested?”

“I am.” Azusa’s voice was cool. “So I’d like to know about the apartment as well.”

“Oh, well, I just told Marie pretty much everything you needed to know-”

“I’d like to hear it from you, if you don’t mind.”

Spirit sighed internally but went into a conversation that was basically a repeat of the one he had with Marie except with everything he apparently didn’t cover. Azusa asked a lot of demanding, super-specific questions about the location, some of which he had no idea and had to low-key google, and by the time they wrapped it up and agreed that she’d come with Marie the following day to check out the apartment, it was two in the morning and Spirit had work in five hours. After hanging up he realized he hadn’t mentioned Maka to Azusa, but figured that maybe Marie would be the one to fill her in and prayed that it wouldn’t be an issue.

Still, as he pressed a kiss against a sleeping Maka’s forehead and flopped down onto his own mattress to sleep, he felt lighter than he had the week before.

Azusa moved in first, and she had even more stuff than Sid did. But this time it wasn’t so bad because she actually paid several guys to bring in her things so Spirit and Sid could just sit back on the couch and watch.

She had been an absolute pain when she and Marie had first stopped by earlier that week--she had actually brought a clipboard and had gone around the apartment writing down every little detail that she thought was imperfect and repeatedly criticized Spirit for his maintenance of it (Spirit was just thankful the bug spray Sid had gotten had finally driven the ants out of the bathroom), as well as his taste in decoration (there was no decoration in the slightest, which was actually probably the problem). He had honestly been surprised when she had announced that she wanted to move in and went ahead with him and Marie to fill out the paperwork. If he wasn’t so desperate for roommates he probably would have wanted to make up some story to dissuade her, because he wasn’t sure he wanted to live under the same roof with such a busybody nag.

But now Spirit was reconsidering a bit, because apparently Azusa owned a 60-inch flat screen TV that she went ahead and placed in the living room. Indicating that everyone else in the apartment was allowed to use it.

It sat in the middle of the room like a shining black statue, and Spirit and Maka were left staring at it in awe.

“It’s big,” Maka not-so-quietly whispered to Spirit.

“I know, huh?” Spirit was doing an internal happy dance just looking at it. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad living with Azusa. Sure she seemed like a pain, but at least she had good taste in TVs.

And to her credit, she’d been nothing but nice to Maka. She didn’t seem too miffed when Spirit had told her on arrival that Maka existed, but she had definitely looked a little on edge when she discovered she would be living with a little kid. Then Maka had (of course) been on her best
behavior and Azusa seemed to relax, likely once she realized that Spirit’s daughter wasn’t a loud, screeching nightmare child.

Spirit could have easily told her that much, he was proud to say.

“Is Marie coming soon?” Maka asked hopefully.

“Soon,” Spirit said. “She’s going to be moving in later tonight.”

“Yay!”

While it had taken Azusa a little while to warm up to Maka when she and Marie had come over the tour the apartment a few days ago, Marie had been over the moon the minute she saw her. She’d cooed over Maka’s little pigtails and adorable outfit, and was roped into playing dolls with her in a span of two seconds. And the feeling was soon mutual- Maka had even shown her their book collection, which was the highest possible honor she could give a near-stranger.

“Do you like Marie?” Spirit asked

“Uh huh!” Maka nodded enthusiastically. “She’s really nice! And pretty! I like her eyepatch.”

Spirit grinned, because he honestly couldn’t believe things were turning out so well. He sure as hell didn’t want to jinx himself. “I’m glad.”

“Hey, Spirit.” Sid leaned over the couch, eyes flickering admiringly to the TV before focusing almost worriedly at Spirit. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure.” The tentative look on Sid’s face was worrying, and Spirit prayed that nothing had gone horribly wrong. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s fine.” Sid shifted nervously. “Okay, so I’ve told you about Mira right?”

“Mira-oh, you mean Nygus? Your sister?”

“Foster sister,” Sid corrected. “Yeah, her.”

“What about her?”

“She got kicked out of her apartment. Her roommates were all assholes, and they gave her the boot a couple days ago when she didn’t pay for the WiFi.”

“Oh. That sucks.”

“Yeah.” Sid cleared his throat. “So—”

A knock on the door sounded, and Spirit got to his feet. “Hold on, it might be Marie.”

“I got it,” Azusa called sharply from the entryway, and was opening the door by the time Spirit dashed in. “Oh-hello.”

It was Marie. It was a young woman in a mummy hoodie with an overstuffed duffel bag over her shoulder.

“Hi,” She said awkwardly.

“This is Mira.” Sid quickly made his way over to her, and clapped her on the shoulder. “Uh, can
she stay with us for a while? Just until she finds a new apartment?”

Nygus glared at him. “You didn’t ask them?”

“I meant to,” Sid replied sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“Sid.”

“Who is she?” Azusa’s eyes narrowed.

“Sid’s sister,” Spirit quickly supplied, before frowning at Sid. “Uh, kinda short notice, don’t you think?”

“I know, I know, but please?” Sid pleaded. “She doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Technically, I can stay with our mom,” Nygus said. “But that would be a bit inconvenient, since she’s a state away. Still,” she added towards Spirit and Azusa. “No hard feelings if I can’t stay. You all seem like you have your hands full.”

“I mean, I don’t mind?” Spirit shrugged, not really sure what else to say. “You’ll probably have to share a room with someone though, since we don’t have that much space.”

“I don’t mind,” Nygus replied quickly, the hint of desperation creeping through making Spirit feel guilty for even considering otherwise. “It’s just until I can find somewhere else to stay. It’s either back with our mom or sleep in my car.”

“That doesn’t sound fun.” In the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t a big deal. “Yeah, you can crash here. Azusa, what do you think?”

Azusa just shrugged, to Spirit’s mild surprise. “We don’t have that much space, and it’ll be borderline cramped with an extra person. But as long as it’s not permanently, I don’t mind.”

“It’s not,” Nygus reassured.

“She can sleep in my room,” Sid added.

“Then I’m fine with it.” There was a crash from down the hall and an eruption of cuss words from one of the men bringing in Azusa’s things. Azusa’s face flooded with irritation as she immediately stormed off towards the sound. “What the hell happened?!”

“Well, welcome to our humble abode.” Spirit gave a half-bow and gestured his hand towards the inside of the apartment. “Want a drink or anything? We have a great coffee machine. That’s pretty much all we have to offer, plus a cool TV, but it’s something.”

Nygus smiled at that. “Maybe later.”

“Papa, who’s that?” Maka had wandered her way to the rest of the adults, and was peering up at Nygus. “Another roommate?”

“No, she’s just staying with us for a while,” Spirit told her warmly.

Nygus raised an eyebrow down at Maka. “And who’s this?”

“I’m Maka.” The little girl grinned at her. “I like your sweater! You look like a mummy!”

“Thank you Maka.” Nygus stuck her hand out. “I’m Nygus. It’s nice to meet you.”
“Ny-gus,” Maka pronounced as she reached out to shake Nygus’ hand. “We have a really big TV now. Want to see it?”

“Let her get settled in, kiddo,” Spirit told her, ruffling her hair. “Then you can give her the grand tour, okay?”

“Okay.” Maka looked a little disappointed, but she immediately brightened again before scampering off. “I could show you my book about mummies too! It’s really good, it has a lot of cool pictures! I bet Azusa would like it too! She looks like she likes history books.”

Nygus grinned. “I’d love to see it.”

“Okay!” Maka scampered off down the hallway, towards her and Spirit’s bedroom. “I’ll go find it!”

“Your sister?” Nygus asked Spirit as she scampered off.

“Daughter,” Spirit replied proudly.

“Really? Well, she’s a cutie.”

Spirit puffed up with pride. “Yes, she is.”

Sid took Nygus in to get settled, and eventually Azusa’s moving guys left looking like they had lost a decade of their lives. As Maka showed all three of them her Egyptian book, Spirit suggested he go pick up a pizza, to which they all readily agreed. Spirit was a little reluctant to leave Maka with two people he didn’t know that well, but decided that she’d be fine, Nygus and Azusa seemed trustworthy. So he left towards the nearest pizza place, which was walking distance from the apartment.

When he was about halfway there his phone buzzed in his pocket. Spirit answered it as soon as he saw Marie’s name on the screen.

“Hey!” Spirit said. "Are you on your way over?"

“Hi, Spirit.” Immediately, Spirit tensed. Her tone didn’t sound like it was carrying good news. In fact, it sounded downright grim.

“What’s wrong?” Spirit asked immediately. “Are you having issues with moving in?”

“No! Well...” She trailed off to a pause. “Listen, this is probably going to sound weird, but what high school did you go to? Was it Shibusen?”

“Uh-yeah...” How did she know that? "...why?”

“Did you-do you remember a guy named Franken Stein?”

At the name, Spirit’s insides went cold.

And for a second he couldn’t even move, because the feeling dropped all the way into his stomach and it felt like it had frozen his limbs.

“Spirit?” Marie’s voice managed to shake some sense into him. “Are you there?”

“Do you?” Her tone was soft, but Spirit gulped at the question.

“Yeah, I did.” He was proud of himself. His voice didn’t really tremble again. “Why?”

She was silent for a minute, and Spirit’s mind whirled.

How did Marie know Stein? Or maybe she didn’t. He might have still been locked up for all Spirit knew—and he didn’t know. But he didn’t know, did he?

Maybe he’d been released. The thought sent another chill through Spirit, and his stomach churned a bit.

“I need to talk to you,” Marie finally said. “Preferably face-to-face?”

“I was on the way to a pizza place,” Spirit offered, somewhat weakly. “Maybe you can meet me there.”

“Okay.”

“What’s going on? Is everything okay? Are you okay?” Maybe Stein had gotten out and had done something to Marie. He really really didn’t want to think that was the case, because despite everything he wanted to believe that Stein wasn’t capable of doing that anymore.

“Oh no I’m fine!” Marie said quickly. “It’s just—I need your help. Text me the address to the pizza place and we’ll talk there okay?”

“Okay.” Spirit wasn’t entirely convinced. She still sounded on edge.

“And—” Marie swallowed. “I’m bringing my boyfriend.”

“Oh-okay?” Spirit was a bit confused about how that factored into Marie possibly knowing Stein. Though he did have to compliment the boyfriend’s taste.

Then he had a thought. Specifically about how Marie could know Stein.

No. There’s no way…

“Alright. See you there.” And then Marie hung up.

Spirit swallowed, looking down at the screen. Sure enough, Marie had disconnected.

Quickly texting her the address, he flipped his phone closed, shoved it in his pocket and continued on his way.

There was no way…

Please let that guess be wrong. It had to be wrong.

He waited about fifteen minutes in front of the pizza place, not wanting to order yet until Marie got there. To fight off his nerves, he tried his best to focus on the curly-haired blonde that he could see through the wide glass window. She had a pretty smile that came easily as she talked to the customers, and the top two buttons on her blouse were undone—

“Hi Spirit.” Marie’s voice made him jump.

“Hey—” he turned to face her and froze dead in his place, not the minute he saw her, but the second
he saw the man standing next to her.

He’d gotten tall-taller than him, now-and was wearing the shittiest, most beat-up turtleneck sweater Spirit had ever seen in his life. He wore glasses now, concealing his eyes when the glint of the streetlamp caught the lens just right.

“Hey Spirit.” Stein took a calm drag off his cigarette. “Long time no see.”

The weirdest thing was that Stein was definitely not a kid anymore. The last time Spirit had saw him, he’d been a full head shorter than Spirit and still had a good amount of baby face.

So it was borderline surreal to see him standing a good three inches taller than Spirit, with a light dusting of stubble on his chin and no baby fat in sight. To Spirit’s faint, almost-amusement, a cigarette hung out from the corner of his mouth, which gave him flashbacks to their junior year when Stein was just starting to come out of his edgy phase and more into his brooding phase.

Some things apparently never changed.

Still, Spirit’s first instinct had been to completely book it out of there immediately, but Marie had practically grabbed them both by the ears, corralled the two of them inside the pizza place, ordered some drinks and forced them to sit down and wait.

Now she was watching them with tight features, almost calculating, as if she was preparing for a fight.

Spirit wasn’t sure if her wariness was warranted or not. Or, more specifically, whether he was going to punch Stein in the nose, cry, throw up on the ground, or just continue sitting there like an idiot. There were so many emotions whirling around in him--fear, anger, a bit of sadness--that he had absolutely no idea how he was actually going to act.

“Marie told me you had a daughter,” Stein finally spoke. The cigarette had nearly burned down to a stub. Stein put it out into the table, and immediately lit another. “Congratulations.”

The mention of Maka helped him regain his bearings, just a little. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He was proud of himself. His voice nearly didn’t tremble.

“To talk to you,” Stein replied, as if that was obvious. “I’m not sure how much Marie told you over the phone, but we’re kind of in a predicament.”

We. Spirit processed Marie’s hand resting on Stein’s arm, almost protectively. Remembered briefly how close they were standing next to each other when they had first walked up to him,

Goddammit. He’d been right.

“So, he’s your infamous boyfriend?” Spirit asked Marie.

Marie bit her lower lip. “Yeah.”

“You know what he did, right?” Spirit spat. He thought she did--the look on her face certainly suggested that she did--but she wasn’t entirely sure. “You know he’s been to prison?”

Marie didn’t look at him. “Yeah. I know.”
I told her all about you,” Stein said smoothly. Spirit noticed that a few waitresses, especially the cute blonde he’d noticed earlier, were glaring at Stein viciously for smoking.

Another thought occurred to him, that sparked a sick feeling in his gut as he turned angrily towards Marie. “So that’s why you wanted to move in, huh?”

“What- no!” Marie’s eye went wide and she shook her head desperately. “No! Spirit, I had no idea who you were when I first talked to you. I swear!”

Spirit gave her disbelieving look.

“I promise!” She insisted, pleadingly.

“Alright.” Spirit wasn’t completely sure if he believed her. For the most part he did—but none of this was supposed to happen in the first place, and the idea that Marie—who he’d liked, dammit, who had played so happily with his daughter, who Maka had liked—had been scheming to find him for Stein’s benefit left too bitter of a taste in his mouth to shake completely.

And the general feelings that came whenever he thought of Stein were raging in full force now that he was actually in front of him. Anger. Betrayal. Frustration.

A bit of sadness too, that came from genuinely missing his best friend.

Though Spirit was never going to admit that.

“So what are you doing here?” Spirit glowered at Stein who didn’t even look fazed, much to Spirit’s mild irritation. “Aren’t you still supposed to be in an asylum or something, or do I have to call the police?”

“No,” Stein said flatly, too flatly, enough that Spirit could tell he’d struck a nerve. “I was released five months, two weeks, and four days ago under probation.”

“Spirit.” That was Marie, looking at him pleadingly. “I know you and Stein have—well, an awful history. I know that you have every right to walk out right now and not hear what we have to say.”

“Well, what do you have to say?” Spirit snapped. “Just spit it out already.”

“I…” Marie trailed off for a second, then visibly steeled herself. “I wanted to know if Stein could stay at the apartment for a while.”

Dead silence.

“No.” As soon as he’d processed what she was asking, the answer was immediate. “No way.”

“Spirit-”

“Why would you ever even think that I would agree to that?! I am not letting him live under my roof, with my daughter-.”

“Spirit, I’m pregnant,” Marie burst out.

That took him aback. He stared at her, trying to gauge if she was lying or not. But her expression was earnest—pleading, desperate.

“You-” He began. “And-” He glanced over at Stein, who was now staring down at the surface of the table, expression unreadable. “You knocked her up?”
“It would seem so.” Stein’s voice was dry.

“So—” Spirit tried to wrap his head around that. If it was weird to picture Stein with a girlfriend, it was even weirder to picture him getting a girl pregnant—

Actually, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to picture that. Not now, when his mind was already whirling from everything that was happening.

“Are you kidding me?” Was all he could manage.

“Stein was living with me before,” Marie began, shifting in her seat uncomfortably. “He didn’t have anywhere else to go. He was homeless, and he couldn’t find a job. I let him eat dinner at my place for a while, and eventually I let him stay with me.”

Even if Spirit hadn’t already known she was pregnant, he knew where this was going. “Let me guess. You ended up banging.”

Marie opened her mouth, then closed it, looking mildly irritated at his bluntness. “Yeah. Stein had found somewhere else to live when I was moving, but the place he was supposed to live fell through. And I can’t just leave him out on the street—”

“So you thought you could just move him into the apartment and no one would care?” Spirit’s voice was pitching high, and he was vaguely aware of people at other tables glancing in their direction, but he didn’t care. “And you said he was homeless—wait, how are you homeless?” Spirit glanced over at Stein. “Couldn’t you be living with your parents? Shouldn’t you be living with your parents?”

“They think I’m attending community college,” Stein said dryly.

“Well are you?!”

Stein puffed a long, snakelike stream of smoke out of his mouth. “Nope.”

Spirit wanted to scream. “Why not? Do you even have a job?”

“Nope.”

Spirit laughed, bitterly. “Oh yeah, that’s perfect! You want to move into my apartment, let your pregnant girlfriend pay the rent, probably cut me open again too—” His voice cracked at the last few words.

“That’s not fair!” Marie protested. “You don’t know what he’s been through!”

“What he’s been through?!?”

“People are staring,” Stein said calmly. Unaffected.

“I don’t care!” Spirit snarled at him.

Marie bit her lip. “Look, it won’t be forever! We’ll move out as soon as possible! It’s just—he’s the father of my child, Spirit! I don’t want to leave him out on the streets, and he doesn’t want to leave me alone! You’ve been in this position too, haven’t you—”

“Don’t even go there,” Spirit cut her off angrily. “Are you even going to keep the kid?”

Marie winced. “I... yeah. I think so.”
He didn’t respond.

“Spirit, it’ll only be for a little while,” Marie pleaded. “I’ll start searching for another apartment the first chance I get, okay? And Stein’s been trying to get a job-- he had a job, actually, but he got fired-”

“Oh wow, I wonder why?”

“Stop it!” Marie snapped, angrily. “It wasn’t his fault that he got fired! It’s not his fault that I’m pregnant!”

“So, blaming a faulty condom, are we?” Spirit asked dryly.

Marie glowered for a second before taking a deep breath. “It’s just for a little while-”

“No.” Spirit glared at them. “Look, I hope everything’ll work out for you two. Really. Stein was my friend once, and I-” He cut himself off. Nope. Wasn’t going to go there. “Bottom line is that I don’t want him under my roof. End of story.”

“We don’t have any other options right now!” Now Marie was full-on pleading, and damn if that didn’t make him feel uncomfortable. “My lease has almost ended, and your apartment’s the only reasonable place I can find right now! If we can’t stay at your place, we have absolutely nowhere to go!”

“Nowhere?” That tampered Spirit’s anger. Just a bit. “Come on. There’s got to be a place you can stay at.”

“There isn’t.” That was Stein. The cigarette was stubbed out against the side of the table, nicotine crumbling and spilling down onto the floor. “If you say no, we’ll end up on the streets. Which wouldn’t be a good thing-- not with a child on the way.”

Spirit immediately bristled. There was a certain lilt in his tone, something almost taunting that made Spirit’s stomach twist.

Stein just smiled, a bit dryly, ignoring Marie, who was glaring at him pointedly. “You’re our last chance, Spirit.”

Spirit fought the urge to strangle Stein from across the table, only refraining because the staff was already eyeing them like they wanted to kick them out.

“Fine.” Spirit glared at Marie. “Only for a little while. I want him out as soon as possible.”

“I know.” Marie gave him a small, shaky smile. “I’ve already been looking. You’ll be the first to know if I find anything. Thank you.”

“Right.” Spirit glowered down at the table, and Marie’s smile slipped almost immediately.

Apparently, he’d jinxed it.

Bringing Stein back to the apartment was a bit of a shitshow.

Sid and Nygus were a bit skeptical, but compared to Azusa their protests were mild. She had been very vocal on the fact that Stein was a homeless, incredibly sketchy-looking man (all points that Spirit agreed with wholeheartedly). Marie’s revelation that she was pregnant only made things worse.
Maka had only offered a small question of who the mysterious man was before Spirit told her, firmly, to go into their room and stay put until he said so.

Then things escalated when Azusa took her protests a bit too far, bordering on insulting, and Marie punched her in the face.

Turns out Marie really did have a killer punch.

Things ultimately resulted in Sid going ahead and helping Marie and Stein move into the bedroom that was supposed to be Marie’s alone, while Nygus bandaged up Azusa’s face.

Come ten o’clock at night, Spirit was nursing a bottle of whiskey from his stash under his bed, watching as Maka flipped through her picture book. He’d just triple-checked their door to make sure it was locked, listening at the door for any outside movement. There was none, everyone should be in bed at this point, but…

Spirit sighed, drawing back from the door and sitting back on his mattress. He was probably being stupid. Stein wouldn’t try anything with so many people, including Marie, under one roof right?

Besides, after all this time maybe Stein had changed.

Despite everything, the thought sparked an absurd feeling of hope.

*He cut you open Spirit,* he reminded himself vehemently. *You woke up with him peeling the skin back on your arm, and you got him locked in the loony bin for it. You’re never going to be friends again.*

*But there is a chance he’s changed. He had to have gotten some form of help in the past five years, otherwise he probably wouldn’t be walking around free. And now he has a girlfriend. Marie can’t be stupid, she knows about what he did and she’s still with him.*

Maybe he’d overreacted at the pizza place. Maybe he should be giving Stein a second chance instead of treating him like a freak, just like all of their other classmates did when they were kids.

*But he cut you open, Spirit,* a small voice nagged at him, sounding just as much as Kami’s voice as it did his own.

*He cut you open, Spirit.*

*You woke up to him peeling the skin back on your arm-*

“Papa, I’m tired.” Maka’s soft little voice cut him out his thoughts. She was sitting on the edge of her bed expectantly, picture book set aside neatly by her mattress, waiting for him to tuck her in. "I want to go to sleep."

Spirit’s heart splintered then, just a bit. It always did, looking at his daughter. Because sometimes it felt like she was the only person he had left.

“Alright kiddo.” Spirit got to his feet, setting the bottle on the ground.

Maka immediately wriggled under the covers as Spirit sat on the edge of her mattress. He pressed a kiss on her forehead before pulling the blanket up to her chin.

“Maka?” he asked softly.
“Hm?” She blinked up at him.

“Could you- could you give your papa a kiss too?”

Maka made a face. “You smell funny again.”

“I know, but please?”

“How come?” she frowned. “Are you sad?”

“No, I’m okay.” Spirit hoped his smile was convincing. “Papa just needs a kiss right now. Can you give me one?”

“Okay.”

Spirit leaned down as she sat up again, and his smile immediately felt less strained when he felt the small, feather-like peck on his cheek. Maka immediately snuggled back under the covers.

“Better?” she asked sleepily.

“Much better.” Spirit gave her one last kiss on the forehead. “Good night Maka.”

“Good night, Papa.”

Usually Spirit would go and finish his drink in the kitchen, but tonight he just placed the bottle next to his mattress, flipped the light switch, and pulled his shirt off in the dark before curling under his own blanket.

He tried to ignore the way the faint, faded surgical scars from years ago felt as though they were almost throbbing.
Chapter 2

"Wake up!"

The last thing Spirit expected (or wanted) was Azusa's hand clapping in his ear and her shrill voice yanking him from his nice, semi-peaceful sleep.

"The fu-" Spirit caught himself just in time, vaguely remembering that his daughter might be present, before making a sound that was borderline inhuman and throwing the covers over his head. "Go away."

"No," Azusa's voice snapped. "Get up. We have things to do."

"We- what? What time izzit?"

"5 AM."

In a half-asleep haze, Spirit briefly, briefly contemplated homicide.

"Are you friggin' nuts?" Was what he said instead.

"No. Get up and take a shower, you look like a slob. We have a lot to do, and since Sid has work at nine-thirty and Marie has work at ten we need to get it done as soon as possible."

Sid. Marie.

Marie and Stein.

The memories of yesterday's events fully flooded in at that point. Stein living under his roof, Marie carrying Stein's kid.

_Stein living under his roof._

Spirit was pretty sure that he didn’t want to get out of bed. Actually, if it were up to him, he was pretty sure he’d rather stay there forever.

But then his blankets were torn away. Spirit just barely managed to not swear as he rolled over on his side, only to be greeted with the sight of a scowling, fully-dressed Azusa with a nasty black eye, and a sheepish, slightly disgruntled-looking Sid who was holding his blankets.

:"Et tu, Sid?" He grumbled.

"Sorry man." To his credit, Sid looked just as miserable as Spirit felt. "If we all have to deal with this, you do too."

Spirit groaned. _Fuck my life._ "Deal with what? What's happening?"

"We need furniture, for one-"

"We have furniture!"
Azusa ignored him. "We need to buy more groceries since now we have two extra people living under our roof, we need way better furnishings than what we have now, I'd like to pick up paint for the kitchen since it's flaking in some areas, preferably a new shade for the bathroom because the one you have right now is hideous, and-
"

"Hey hey, hold on!" Spirit sat up, groggily, and the lack of sleep definitely wasn't doing him any favors. "Look, theoretically that sounds great, but we can't buy all that in one day! Also-wait, where's Maka?"

"Eating breakfast with the others." Azusa waved a dismissive hand. "And don't worry about the money."

“What do you mean don’t worry about the money? I’m pretty sure that’ll cost way more money than we can afford—”

“I’m paying for it."

“-Huh?"

“I said I’m paying for it.” Azusa turned on her heel, pushing past Sid and leaving through the door. “Now hurry up."

Spirit sighed, and reluctantly tossed back the covers.

At least he wasn't the only one who looked totally dead on his feet.

After he'd showered, brushed his hair, threw on some clothes, and generally made sure he looked decently presentable, he'd exited his bathroom to find Nygus sipping coffee with her hood pulled over her head and Sid looking like there was nothing more he wanted to do than to crawl back into bed and never come out. And Maka, his poor baby girl, kept yawning and rubbing her eyes as she leaned over her picture book.

The only one who looked semi-coherent, other than the Demon Queen (which Spirit had officially dubbed Azusa), was Stein. Although, since Spirit knew that Stein didn't actually need much sleep to function, and never had for as long as he had known him, he figured that was a given.

The sight of Stein sitting at the kitchen table was jarring. Something about it just seemed so weirdly normal. As if he hadn’t cut Spirit open, Spirit hadn’t gotten him sent to a psychiatric hospital, and instead they’d just became roommates after graduation like they’d planned.

Hell, Stein didn’t even seem mad at Spirit for having gotten him locked up— or at least as far as Spirit could tell. As long as he’d known Stein, there were occasions where he had no idea what he was thinking.

"Spirit, do you have a babysitter for Maka?" Azusa asked, cutting off his thoughts. She was already on her phone, typing furiously away at god-knew-what.

Spirit winced. Blair would probably roast him alive if he woke her up at this hour. "Can't we just take her with us? To wherever we're going?"

"So you don't?"
"No, I do, it's just sort of last minute and I don't want to bother her at this time in the morning. She usually works at night."

Azusa glared at him. Which was terrifying, and Spirit could feel a part of his soul crumbling just through one look. "Fine. We'll take her along."

"Can I read there?" Maka's head popped up.

"Of course, honey," Spirit told her assuredly. "We'll even get you a new book if you want."

"Alright, then I don't mind." Maka looked back down at her book.

Spirit's heart swelled. Was there anyone more perfect than his daughter? No. No there wasn't.

"So, can we go now?" Azusa crossed her arms impatiently. "Is everyone finally ready? Where's Marie?"

"Kneeled on the bathroom floor with her head in the toilet," Nygus replied.

Azusa blinked. "Oh. Other than that, is everyone ready?"

"I'd like to get some coffee first," Spirit said, already heading towards the coffee machine. Sweet, sweet coffee machine.

"You're out of coffee," Stein announced, so suddenly that Spirit couldn't help but jump.

"Huh?"

"You're out of coffee," Stein repeated.

It took a minute for him to comprehend what Stein had said. "How? I just bought a new bag the other day!"

Sid cleared his throat, glaring at Nygus. She flushed, and looked down at her coffee cup.

Her giant coffee cup.

"You gotta be kidding me," Spirit moaned.

"I'm sorry," Nygus said sheepishly. "I thought you had more."

"I didn't get any either," Sid grumbled.

"I said I was sorry!"

"Deathbucks then," Spirit decided. "We'll stop at Deathbucks."

"Yes!" Sid whooped.

"No." Azusa silenced him with a glare, her glasses glinting dangerously in the light. "We're on a strict schedule, we can't waste any time. We can get coffee afterwards."

"We'll take a vote!" Surely she wouldn't say no to that, Spirit thought as he raised his hand.
"Everyone who wants to go to Deathbucks on the way there, raise your hand!"

Sid raised his hand. Nygus did too, sheepishly. So did Stein, to Spirit's mild surprise.

"Why do you want to go?!" Azusa snapped irritably.

"I like the blueberry muffins," Stein replied with a completely straight face.

Azusa looked like she wanted to bean all of them (ha) with Nygus' giant coffee cup, which genuinely looked like it could kill a man. “Fine. But we’ll spend no more than fifteen minutes there, all right?”

At that point, Marie finally strode into the kitchen. She looked fairly well put together considering, her hair pulled back into a bun and her sweater and skirt looking near-immaculate. She certainly didn't look like she had had her head in the toilet.

*Good for her,* Spirit thought.

“Sorry about that,” Marie said, a bit too brightly. “I’m ready to get going.”

“Have you eaten?” Stein asked.

She made a face. “Please don’t make me eat right now.”

“You should eat,” Stein repeated, almost gently.

“We’re going to Deathbucks,” Spirit suggested. “You could grab something light there.”

“Like the muffins,” Stein agreed.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Can we go now?” Azusa asked impatiently, looking as though she was on the verge of snapping her fingers at all of them.

“I guess?” Spirit glanced over at everyone, who all looked generally exasperated. Sid shrugged, Marie and Stein just blinked at him, and Nygus looked like she wanted to rest her head on the table.

“Great.” Azusa slid her phone in her bag. “Also Spirit, just as a sidenote, I don’t know in what universe that-” she gestured at him. “-counts as decent, but it’s not the one we’re living in.”

Spirit was pretty sure his eye twitched at that.

---

They all piled into Nygus’ car, which was conveniently a minivan that could fit them all. On the way to Deathbucks, Azusa actually brought out her clipboard from her bag and began rattling off everything on the list that she felt she needed in the apartment, in addition to laying subtle barbs towards Spirit for not already having every single thing that was on there. Spirit had eagerly escaped into Deathbucks as soon as they arrived, dragging Maka along with him.

“I can’t believe she brought the clipboard.” Spirit eyed Azusa from across the coffee shop where she and Nygus were ordering coffee. Stein and Marie were behind them in line, murmuring to each other. After getting their own orders, Spirit sat with Maka and Sid next to the window. Outside through the nearby window, they could see the steady stream of cars moving through the drive-
through.

Sid just shrugged. “At least she’s efficient.”

“I guess.” Spirit took a sip of his latte, taking a second to relish in the feeling of much-needed caffeine settling into his system. “You okay, Maka?”

“Uh huh.” Maka, engrossed in her book, didn’t even look up at him.

"Hey look," Sid began. "I know this isn't any of my business, and if you don't want to tell me I'm not the kind of man to pry. But I gotta ask-- what the hell happened with you and Stein?"

Spirit nearly choked on his scone, letting out a strangled cough before forcing the entirety of it down his throat.

Maka glanced up from her book curiously.

"You alright?" Sid asked, looking alarmed.

"Gh- uh huh." Spirit cleared his throat. "Yeah-I'm fine. Just fine. Everything is fine."

"Right." Sid didn't appear convinced.

Spirit prayed that he'd let it go after that. "What were you saying?"

"You and Stein."

Nope. Wasn't happening. Spirit fought the urge to groan.

If Sid noticed, he didn’t mention it. “Marie mentioned you already knew each other right?”

Fuck. “She did?”

“Yeah.” Sid frowned at him. “Was it a secret?”

“N-no. Not necessarily.”

“So, you did know each other?”

"Since fourth grade," Spirit replied almost immediately, before he could really think about it.

Sid raised an eyebrow. “Wow. That’s a long time.”

“I guess.”

Sid just looked at him. So did Maka, big green eyes silent and intrigued.

Spirit sighed. “Look, it's... complicated.”

“You know, you're allowed to tell me to bug off if you don’t want to talk about it,” Sid said.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Spirit said almost immediately.

Sid shrugged. “Alright.”
“Did you fight with him, Papa?” Maka asked.

Spirit smiled at her, once again hoping it didn’t look feigned. “Something like that, kiddo.”

They didn’t talk about it. Nygus seemed to get bored waiting in line with Azusa, Stein, and Marie, and after getting her latte she plopped down next to Spirit to make a joke about Azusa’s coffee preferences. After that, the conversation went smoothly.

Still, the topic wasn’t far from Spirit’s mind. Especially when Azusa, Stein, and Marie settled in the table next to them, Marie apologizing guiltily for blacking Azusa’s eye the other night and Stein caught his eye from the other table, raising an eyebrow.

Spirit immediately looked down and focused on the coffee in his hands, letting Sid, Nygus, and Maka’s chatter wash over him like a wave.

Azusa dragged them through four different furniture stores, three different department stores, a paint store, and the grocery store in the span of two and a half hours. Spirit hadn’t even thought that was possible. They didn’t even buy anything half of them-some of the stuff that Azusa wanted to get was definitely not to Spirit’s taste (which, despite what Azusa said, wasn’t completely nonexistent), and they had spent decently long periods of time arguing over paint samples. Sid had some opinions too, and Marie even got into a long debate with him over which type of wood would look better with the color teal.

The whole thing had actually been kind of fun. It wasn’t as bad having Stein there as Spirit had thought it would be, since he mostly trailed behind Marie like a shadow, didn’t say anything, and generally just stood around looking off-putting and making the cashier look uncomfortable. Nygus didn’t have many opinions about the decor to offer either, pointing out that she wasn’t really planning on staying for too long so it didn’t really matter, but she did take Marie’s side in the wood debate with Sid. They even got kicked out of one uppity, overpriced store with some foreign name Spirit couldn’t remember when he had taken one of the oversized shopping carts, got Sid, Nygus, and Maka to pile onto it and used their weight to propel down a huge loading ramp, just barely managing not to crash into a forklift. Azusa had lectured them until he felt like his ears were going to fall off, but it was totally worth it.

But the craziest part was that they didn’t go to cheap stores like Wal-Mart or Target. No, Azusa dragged them all the way to high-class department stores, places where looking at the price tags made Spirit want to pass out.

But as it turned out, Azusa was loaded.

As in, the total at the first store came out to over 1,000 dollars. But right as Spirit was about to start crying, Azusa had gone ahead and simply swiped her credit card without even blinking an eye.

And then, had gone ahead and bought 200 dollars worth of groceries, ignoring everyone else’s incredulous, awe-struck looks. Even Stein had looked a little shocked.

It all explained the giant TV at least.

“Are you rich?” Maka asked her on the drive back to the apartment.

“Maka,” Spirit chided gently, even though he himself was absolutely dying to know the answer.

“It’s fine.” Azusa craned her head around to look at them from the front seat. “And to answer your
question, I suppose I am.”

“Still, you didn’t have to pay for...like, everything.” Sid pointed out from the far back seat, where he was squished next to Stein and Marie. “We could have helped out.”

“Probably not much,” Spirit agreed. “But yeah, we could have.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Azusa waved a dismissive hand. “My father gave me a deposit specifically to help me get started in my new apartment. He understands the need for proper furnishings.”

“Her dad’s a CEO,” Marie added, poking her head over the back seats. “So yeah, they have a lot of money.”

“Enough to buy 4,000 dollars worth of furniture?” Stein asked incredulously.

Azusa shrugged again. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big-” Spirit gaped. “4,000 dollars!”

“That’s only about half of the deposit my father gave me,” Azusa said somewhat defensively. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Holy crap,” Sid said softly.

“You still didn’t have to buy everything,” Spirit said, semi-awkwardly. He felt like he had made contact with a whole other world here—never in his wildest dreams would he ever even consider spending even half of that amount of money on furniture in one day, but Azusa was acting like it was nothing.

Not to mention she was technically buying everything for the entire apartment. Something about that felt a little weird—Spirit supposed that was just him not being used to that kind of luxury. Or charity. He wasn’t sure which it was at this point. Azusa was a little hard to get a read on, and he couldn't quite figure out what her reasoning for this whole spectacle.

Azusa just snorted. “It was completely for my benefit. I am not going to live in the place like it is now.”

“Then why did you make everyone else come along?”

“Well, you live there too. I thought you’d appreciate taking part in the decisions we made today.”

“I do!” Spirit raised his hands. “Trust me, I do.”

“Definitely,” Sid added. “And we’re not complaining either.”

“I am,” Spirit countered. “Mainly at being woken up at five in the morning. Other than that, I’m not.”

He really wasn’t—a part of him was sort of excited. Once they brought all the stuff in, the apartment was actually going to look great. It felt weird and awesome at the same time. If Azusa hadn’t woken him up at zero-dark thirty and wasn’t generally a micromanaging demon, she’d probably be his favorite roommate by now.

Once they got back, Azusa immediately began doling out tasks for everyone to carry out—except for Stein, who immediately retreated to his and Marie’s room while Marie helped Sid bring in the
new furniture. Spirit’s suggestion that he help instead was immediately dismissed.

“She’s stronger than you,” Sid said. “Way, way stronger. I’d rather have her help me than you to be honest.”

“Oh.” Spirit felt a little put out by that. “Why? I’m pretty strong!”

“No you’re not.”

“Hey!”

“Isn’t she pregnant?” Nygus pointed out. “Should she really be moving furniture?”

“She’s right here,” Marie cut in, irritably. “And I’m not invalid. I can move furniture just fine.”

“Better carrying furniture than inhaling paint fumes,” Azusa added as she joined them, plopping two cans of paint on the kitchen table. “Which is what you two-”, she gestured at Spirit and Nygus, “Will be doing.”

Spirit made a face. He hated painting, especially the smell of paint fumes. Too bad he couldn’t pretend he was pregnant too.

“Can I help too?” Maka asked.

Azusa blinked. “Uh... sure. You could help me carry in groceries I guess. And speaking of helping-” She turned towards Marie again. “Get your useless boyfriend out here to help too.”

Marie sighed. “I’ll try. He’s not really one for home decorating.”

Spirit snorted. “Good luck with that.”

Azusa ignored him, instead handing him a paint can. “Get to it. All of you.”

“Why can’t you hire someone to paint like you hired people to carry in the furniture earlier?” Spirit asked irritably, reluctantly taking the paint can.

“Because I doubt you all have anything better to do.”

“I have work!”

“Not until noon.” She adjusted her glasses. “Sid told me your schedule. It’s already logged in the calendar.”

“Calendar?”

“I thought it would be most efficient if we all knew each other’s schedules in order to avoid any related confusion. Hence I bought a calendar, which I’m planning to hang in the kitchen. We could also use it to distribute chores, mark rent days, and so on and so forth. That reminds me, Sid mentioned you were interviewing for an internship tomorrow. Is there anything else on your schedule that we should know about?”

“I think Sid knows my schedule better than I do at this rate,” Spirit said, narrowing his eyes Sid, who just gave him a sheepish look in response.

“What time is your interview, Spirit?”
“Eight, but my bus leaves at seven-thirty.”

Azusa immediately brought out her clipboard (Spirit internally rolled his eyes) and marked it. “And you mentioned you have a babysitter for Maka?”

“Yeah, my friend Blair. I’ll give you her number, if you need it for some reason.”

Azusa glared at him. “Yes, I need it. I’ll put it on the calendar along with any other relevant contact information. Which also reminds me- Marie, whoever your physician is, you need to put their number on there too.”

“Oh okay?” Marie’s brows furrowed.

Azusa sighed. “Stop looking at me like I’m crazy. We’re all living under the same roof as a child, which gives us some responsibility in making sure she doesn’t go and die or something.”

“Maka’s my daughter,” Spirit said, caught between feeling a bit defensive and bit--well--grateful that she was taking an interest in Maka’s well-being like that. He always sort of appreciated the offer of help. Only thing was, he wasn’t sure if this was a veiled insult at his capability to take care of her, and he didn’t appreciate the possibility. “That’s my job.”

“Yeah, but what if you’re not home? What if there’s an emergency, and Maka’s left home alone? Or what if you can’t pick her up from your friend’s?”

“She’s got a point,” Sid said. “If you need the extra help, I don’t think any of us would mind giving it.”

“Definitely not,” Marie agreed, smiling at Azusa. “That’s still really sweet of you to bring it up like that, Azusa.”

“It’s just being decent.” Azusa actually flushed a little.

“I do appreciate that, but-” Spirit began, only for Azusa to abruptly cut him off again.

“And not only are we living under the same roof as a child, we are living under the same roof as a pregnant woman. And her formerly homeless boyfriend.”

Spirit flinched.

“Azusa,” Marie said waringly, dangerously.

“Relax,” Azusa said hurriedly, possibly remembering where her black eye had come from. “All I’m saying is that I’m sure you two will need some help in the near future.”

“This is still all awfully communal of you,” Sid remarked. “I didn’t take you for the type.”

“Again- we’re all living under the same roof.” Azusa looked a touch defensive. “It’s just common decency.”

“Softie,” Spirit coughed in his arm.

“Franken and I aren’t staying for long, though.” Marie crossed her arms. “It’s only until we can find an apartment of our own.”

Azusa stared at her. “I thought-”
Marie shrugged, but her eye was focused on the ground. Spirit felt a twinge of guilt when he realized that she wasn’t going to throw him under the bus. “It’ll be easier.”

“It’ll be hard as hell to find an apartment for you two, right?” Nygus asked. “I’ve already been looking, and people are already filing in for next semester. Not to mention everything’s expensive as hell, especially if one of you isn’t working. Isn’t that the reason you’re staying here in the first place?”

Guilt began to churn in Spirit’s stomach. He figured they’d be able to find somewhere to stay, but what if they couldn’t? What could they do then? Hell, what could he do then? He couldn’t just kick them out.

“I’m sure we’ll figure it out,” Marie said, too-brightly. “Don’t worry about it. Sid, want to start with the couch?”

“But- wait, we got a couch?” Sid scowled immediately. “We already have a couch.”

“We did,” Azusa said, watching Marie carefully. When Marie didn’t look at her, she sighed, and seemingly dropped the subject. “The one we have now is probably the most hideous part of the apartment.”

“The most-” Sid looked as though she had just murdered a puppy in front of him. “The most-”

Maka patted him on the arm comfortingly.

“I like that couch,” Spirit said, partially to appease Sid and partially to defend the poor couch’s honor.

Azusa just rolled her eyes. “Of course you do.”

They only lasted about twenty minutes after they’d dispersed to carry out their separate tasks--Maka going with Azusa to bring in groceries, Sid and Marie going to bring in furniture, and Spirit and Nygus going to the bathroom to figure out how to somehow open a paint can without a screwdriver--before a blood-curdling scream erupted from the kitchen.

Spirit was hot on Nygus’ heels as they ran into the kitchen.

The refrigerator door was open, with Azusa reeled back in horror and covered a very bewildered-looking Maka’s eyes. Marie and Sid were already there, Sid’s jaw dropped and eyes wide while Marie’s hands were over her mouth.

“What-” Spirit began, somewhat panickedly, before he saw it.

A horse head was sitting in the refrigerator.

A real, honest-to-god, semi-bloody horse head that looked like it came straight out of a slaughterhouse.

“Oh my god.” Spirit stomach churned, uncomfortably, but thankfully he didn’t throw up.

“Hooooly shit,” Nygus gasped.

“Language,” Maka grumbled, struggling against Azusa’s concealing hands.

“Uh, Spirit?” Sid asked in a small voice.
“Don’t look at me!” Spirit grabbed Maka’s arm to pull her away from Azusa and face her back towards the gruesome sight.

“I wanna see,” Maka whined.

“No, Maka-”

“I’m going to be sick.” Azusa’s face was stark-white, but was rapidly starting to shift to green.

“Stein!” Marie yelled angrily.

Stein. Spirit’s brain immediately made the connection, remembering the disgusting jars of roadkill, the random dead animals he had kept in an old fridge he’d made Spirit help dig out from a junkyard.

Of fucking course.

“Stein!” Spirit yelled, unable to keep the anger out of his voice and not even bothering to try. “Get in here!”

No answer.

“Wait, Stein did this?” Sid’s eyes bugged out. “What the-”

“Franken Stein, get in here now!” Marie shouted.

“What?”

Spirit practically jumped to the ceiling when Stein seemed to almost materialize out of the living room. He wasn’t the only one-everyone but Marie gave a start at his sudden appearance.

“Wait.” Nygus glanced at Stein and then down the hallway where he had gone previously. “How did you- weren’t you-”

“Stein.” Marie’s irritated voice cut her off. “What is this?”

Stein blinked slowly, almost owlishly. “A refrigerator.”

“In the refrigerator, dumbass,” Spirit snapped.

“Papa!” Maka shouted irritably, still squirming to get out of Spirit’s hands.

Spirit flinched. “Sorry.”

Stein peered in the fridge. “Oh, you got more milk. That’s nice. For senpai’s sake I hope you got coffee too.”

Marie looked like she was about to strangle him. “Stein.”

“Hey, man.” Sid looked uneasy. “Is the uh, disembodied horse head yours?”

“Horse head?” Maka cried in disbelief. “A real horse head?”

“Don’t look,” Spirit told her, privately fuming. He was going to throttle Stein for almost scarring his little girl for life.

For once, Maka didn’t protest, burying her face into his shirt.
Stein didn’t even look fazed. “Oh yes, that’s mine.”

Immediately, everybody started yelling at once.

“How the fuck-” Azusa started.

“What the fuck-” Nygus cut in.

“Language!” Maka yelled, voice slightly muffled against Spirit’s jacket.

Spirit went ahead and covered her ears at this point, given the sheer amount of shocked, incredulous profanity spilling out of everyone’s mouths. Including his own.

“Is it real?!“ Sid asked, looking horrified.

“Well I wouldn’t put a fake horse head in the refrigerator,” Stein said dryly.

“It hasn’t even been twelve hours!” Spirit yelled. “Twelve hours, and you’re already putting animal heads everywhere! What is wrong with you?!“

“Stein!” Marie sounded just as pissed as Spirit. “I told you not to bring any more animal parts!”

“Hold up!” Nygus held up her hands. “‘Any more’ animal parts? As in, there’s more?”

Stein didn’t even look fazed by all the yelling—the bastard probably didn’t even give a shit about what was going on, Spirit knew, fuming a bit. “Yes. In jars. Want to see them?”

“Hell no!”

“Is this just a regular thing you do or what?” Sid asked, somewhat tentatively.

“Stein.” Marie’s voice was like steel, and holy crap she was mad. Spirit could practically feel sparks of irritation flying off of her, and it was incredibly intimidating, despite her being almost two heads shorter than him. “I said no animals parts other than the ones in our room!”

“Jesus Christ.” Azusa looked utterly gobsmacked.

“But you said I could bring my experiments. That-” Stein pointed to the thing in the fridge, “—is an experiment.”

“At least move it out of the fridge!” Marie snapped, before taking a deep breath and visibly reeling herself in enough that she looked less like she was going to strangle Stein and more like at most she was going to yell at him. “Please, Franken.”

“Where am I supposed to put it, then?”

“Not in the fridge,” Spirit cut in with a growl.

Stein actually rolled his eyes. “Again, where am I supposed to put it, then?”


“Your helpfulness astounds me, Spirit.”

“You-” Now Spirit had to take a deep breath and take a second to count to ten to prevent himself from strangling Stein where he stood.
“Is this normal?” Nygus asked incredulously. “Do you pull this shit often, or-?”

“Language,” Maka muttered into Spirit’s shirt.

“Not always,” Marie said hurriedly. “He doesn’t usually keep his experiments in the fridge. Don’t worry about this happening again.”

“But I need somewhere to keep my experiments,” Stein said.

“Not in the fridge!” Spirit felt as though he was a goddamn echo of himself at this point.

“Actually,” Azusa said, having seemingly recovered from the shock, but still sounding somewhat faint. “You can keep it in there.”

“Huh?”

Spirit wasn’t the only one who looked surprised. They all stared at Azusa as if she had gone insane.

“You really think we’re going to be putting our food in there after this?” Azusa snapped. “We’re getting a new fridge. As soon as possible. He can have that one if he really wants it.”

“I can?” Stein asked.

“Yes. Just- just take it.”

“Alright. I will.”

“Good.” Azusa rubbed her temples. “Great.”

“Marie, can you help me move it into our room?”

“Move it yourself,” Marie grumbled. “Wait- it won’t fit in our room.”

“Sure it will. If we get rid of the dresser-”

“We need the dresser, Franken.”

“I think we should make a rule,” Sid interjected. “Namely, a rule against storing animal parts in the refrigerator, at least the one where we keep our food. And I can’t believe we actually need a rule for that.”

“Definitely put that on the calendar,” Spirit agreed.

Azusa shot him a dirty look-- she probably thought he was mocking her. “You know what? I will. Now, who wants to go back out with me to get a new refrigerator?”

Spirit glanced around. No one made to move-- probably because they were all tired of shopping.

Azusa sighed. “Spirit, come with me.”


“Because you were the one complaining about painting the bathroom, and Nygus is probably better at it than you anyway. Sid needs to bring in the furniture, and Marie needs to handle her boyfriend and make sure he doesn’t do this kind of thing again.”
Stein snickered. Everyone glared at him except for Marie, who just sighed.

“Fine,” Spirit grumbled. Well, at least he was getting out of painting. “Maka, we’re getting a new refrigerator.”

“But I don’t want to go shopping again,” Maka whined.

“She can stay here,” Nygus suggested. “I’m sure between us, we can keep an eye on her.”

Us.

Between Nygus, Sid, Marie, and Stein.

“It’s fine.”

“But I want to stay Papa.” Maka looked up at him, eyes big and pleading and utterly melting his heart.

Spirit almost said yes. The word was right on his lips.

Then his eyes flickered to Stein, standing to the side and watching the two of them almost curiously, horse head perched behind him in the fridge like a twisted piece of scenery.

“We’ll stop by the bookstore again,” Spirit told Maka.

Maka immediately perked up. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

Azusa scowled. “We will?”

“Please?” Spirit pleaded, giving her the best puppy-dog eyes he could muster.

“Please?” Maka echoed, immediately following suit.

“Ugh, stop that.” Azusa rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Maka gave a little cheer, as Sid slowly stepped forward and closed the door against the horse head, concealing it from view.

“Just gonna-yeah,” he muttered.

Late that night, after he finished his shift and picked Maka up from Blair’s, he came back to tuck Maka into bed. After kissing her forehead and hanging up the little witch hat Blair had given her on the corner of one of their storage bins, he quietly shut the door behind him, intending to make a sandwich or something to eat before he went to bed. The sound of murmurs, however, derailed that intention as soon as he recognized the voices.

Stein and Marie.

Curiosity got the better of him before he even knew what he was doing, and he slowly padded down the hall far enough to hear snippets of their conversation for clearly.

“-told you that you shouldn’t do things like that-” Marie’s voice was muffled, but audible enough that he could hear what she was saying.
“Spirit doesn’t care.” Spirit felt a jolt when he recognized his name.

“I think he does care Franken.” Marie sounded exasperated. “Look, you can’t just do what you want, okay? Spirit’s doing us a huge favor. This is probably really hard for him.”

“What does that have to do with the horse?”

“Because my point is that you can’t just leave animal parts wherever you want, you can’t act like you own the place when Spirit’s the one who’s letting us stay. Not after everything that happened between you two!”

“I’m not trying to-”

“I know. I know you’re not trying to. But Spirit doesn’t. And he deserves better than that, don’t you think?”

A took a second for Stein to respond.

“Marie, I think we should consider Plan B.”

“No.”

“Marie-”

“You don’t have anywhere to go.” Marie’s voice was firm. “I’m not letting you go back to the way you were before. I won’t. We stick together, no matter what.”

“Spirits a lot more likely to let you stay here if I’m not with you,” Stein said.

Spirit’s gut churned.

“Not even an option.”

“Marie, you need a stable living condition, you know that high amounts of stress aren’t good for you-”

“No. Even if Spirit gives us that option, I’d prefer to be kicked out along with you.”

I’m not going to kick you out! Spirit wanted to protest, though he’d be lying if he said that a part of him really wanted to. He didn’t want Stein in his house, in what supposed to be his safe space, where he was living with his daughter. It was that simple.

“But-”

“Frank.” Marie’s voice had suddenly gone gentle. “We’ll be okay. Okay? We’ll find another apartment, maybe with just the two of us. You’ll find another job. The baby’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. Everything’ll be okay.”

(“We’ll take a year off, raise up some money to help raise him or her. It might take a while, but we can do it, I know we can. You’ll get into Harvard, just like you always planned.”)

(“It’ll be okay Kami. We’ll all be okay.”)

Fuck.

“Frank?” Marie’s soft voice was the last thing he heard before fleeing down the hallway.
Evidently, he wasn’t the only one who needed a drink, which made him feel a bit better.

“Didn’t take you as a vodka person,” Spirit commented, eyeing the expensive-looking bottle on the table.

“What are you doing here?” Azusa had a cold compress pressed to her still-healing eye and a glass in her hand as she scowled at him.

“Because I’d like a drink of that, please.” Spirit gestured at the bottle as he opened the nearby cupboard and took down a glass of his own.

“No.” Azusa slid the bottle away from him. “Get your own.”

“Please? I keep my stash in my room, and I don’t want to wake up Maka.”

“You keep your liquor in the same room as your daughter?” Azusa sounded incredulous.

“Pleaseee?” Spirit whined.

Azusa sighed. “Fine. Just this once. And I’ll warn you, it’s a bit strong.”

Spirit just scoffed.

Azusa shrugged “Suit yourself.”

Spirit grinned as he set the glass on the table and she poured him a drink. Immediately, he took a sip and almost reeled back because damn, it was much stronger than he expected.

“It’s not too bad,” he managed.

Azusa smirked, which made him scowl in response. “I’m sure.”

“So.” Talking. Talking was good. “Any reason why you’re here?”

“Here?”

“You know. Drowning your sorrows alone after everyone has gone to bed.”

Azusa swirled her glass for a moment before answering. “Because my best friend punched me in the face yesterday.”

Mine cut me open, Spirit almost replied before stopping himself. The only reason I found out was because the anesthesia didn’t work right, and I was awake the entire time he was playing with the veins in my arm.

“I thought you guys smoothed that over?” he asked instead.

“We did.” Azusa took a sip. “She apologized, so did I. No hard feelings. However, she’s still pregnant. Which is an issue.”

“Yeah, well.” Spirit shrugged. “It happens.”

“She might be throwing her life away!” Azusa snapped, looking absolutely indignant at his nonchalant tone. “She’s in the middle of her college career, she can’t just drop out to take care of a baby!”
“In the middle of her college career,” Spirit mimicked. “You sound like a counselor.”

Azusa glared at him. “But you understand my concern. You have to. How old were you when you had Maka?”

“Eighteen.”

“Astonishment.”

“Eighteen?”

“Fresh out of high school.”

Azusa’s brows shot up. “What did you do when Maka was born?”

Spirit shrugged. “Took a couple years off before I enrolled. Worked my ass off to take care of her. Met Blair.”

“Where was her mother? Uh- if you don’t mind me asking.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Her mother’s at Harvard. She took a gap year to have her and take care of her, but she had to go back. So I’ve been the main one taking care of Maka.”


Spirit grinned a bit. “Yeah. Kami’s pretty brilliant. So I can’t really begrudge her for not being able to stay. She calls a lot and visits too, so it all worked out.”

However, there was a nagging, ever-present little voice in the back of his head that pointed out that Kami hadn’t visited at all in a long time, and hadn’t called in almost three months, but he pushed it away. There was enough going on that he didn’t want to get into that too.

“Still, it must have been hard,” Azusa said, almost carefully. Like she didn’t want to say anything to offend him. “Taking care of an infant on your own.”

“It was.” Spirit wasn’t going to deny that.

“Did your family help out at all?”

“Kami’s parents send a check for about a hundred every month. That helps with rent, so.”

“Did you ever regret it?”

“No.” There were a lot of things Spirit would have changed about the past, but Maka wasn’t one of them. Maka was the best thing to ever happen to him. He’d never regret having her, ever. “I will admit though, it worked out pretty well for us in the end.”

“Mm.” Azusa stared down into her glass.

Spirit studied her. She seemed slightly less guarded than she usually was-alcohol really did work wonders. “You’re really worried, aren’t you?”

“What do you think?” Azusa asked dryly. “Marie’s my best friend. And I still don’t exactly trust her boyfriend.”

Spirit swallowed a bit at the mention of Stein, going ahead and downing half of the glass, tossing his head back and nearly coughing at the burn down his throat. Already his head was starting to feel a little light, thank god.
“The feeling’s mutual,” Azusa said, watching him.

Spirit huffed out a laugh at that. “Yeah.”

“Do you think he’d hurt her?”

Oh boy.

He reached for the bottle again, uncorking it and topping off his glass before taking another drink.

He thought of the two of them together. Stein and Marie. Marie and Stein. Pretty, pregnant Marie who was more than a head shorter than him but could probably break his nose easily, and towering, intimidating Stein, who never said a word but could probably crush him to dust. They actually looked pretty good together, Spirit realized. Somehow the two of them seemed to fit together easily—gold hair and silver, gray beat-up turtleneck and black and yellow sweater dress, glasses and scars and an eyepatch.

How many times had he tried to set Stein up with someone in high school? How many times had Stein actively resisted any sort of company besides Spirit’s in all the years Spirit had known him? Stein was a loner by nature, Spirit was just one of the lucky few who had managed to pass through those guards. So something made Marie special. Something that made Stein care about her. Because Stein did care about her— the more Spirit thought about it, the more he knew.

Which only made him nervous. Because Stein had supposedly cared about him.

“I hope not,” he managed. “I really, really hope not.”

“Are you going to help them?” Azusa asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I- I don’t know.”

Azusa studied him. Spirit focused down into his glass, purposely trying not to meet her eyes. He could practically feel her trying to read him, or analyze him, or something, and he didn’t like it.

“Well,” Azusa said after a second. “Can you at least help me help them?”

“Sure.” Mainly because he wanted this part of the conversation to be over, preferably immediately.

“Sure?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Alright.” Azusa held up her glass. “Cheers, then?”

Why not? “Cheers.”

Their glasses clinked together.

Drinking as much of that alcohol as he did turned out to be a mistake.

Spirit just barely managed not to throw up when he got up the next morning, head pounding and
groaning as he flopped out of his mattress and stumbled onto the floor.

Fuck.

Then he looked at his clock.

He had less than fifteen minutes before his bus left.

FUCK-

Unfortunately, he couldn’t move very fast with his pounding headache. After pulling on his suit and trying his best to freshen up in the bathroom, he stumbled into the kitchen to brew his coffee.

The only ones in the kitchen were Azusa, Maka, and a familiar cat-ears headband--Blair--all sitting at the newly-purchased kitchen table. He’d arranged for Blair to watch his daughter while he was at his interview, and she was already chatting away with Maka at the kitchen table while she ate her bowl of cereal. Azusa was on her laptop, and she smirked at him a little as he came in. She, of course, looked as well put together as always.

“You look terrible,” Azusa remarked, almost smugly.

“Thanks,” Spirit replied dryly, going over to give Maka a quick kiss on the top of her head. “Morning kiddo.”

“Morning Papa,” Maka responded cheerfully as she happily stuffed her face with cereal.

“Hiya tomcat!” Blair swung around in her chair to face him. Spirit noticed that she was dressed for work—short, tight, shorts, black bra top, thigh-high boots, and her trademark cat ears headband perched on her head. Almost immediately, his mood lifted, just a little. “I made coffee. Figured you’d need it.”

Sure enough, there was a freshly-brewed pot waiting for him in Joe’s coffee machine. “You’re a magnificent woman, you know that?”

Blair practically purred. “I do. Rough night?”

“Yeah.” Spirit hurriedly poured a cup of coffee and began to gulp it down, hoping it would at least somewhat help his pounding headache. “Sorry, I’m running late.”

“No problem.” Blair looked apologetic. “So, uh, I can’t watch Maka today. Well, I guess I can, but only for like... twenty minutes or so?”

Shit. “How come?”

She made a face. “My boss gave me another shift at the last minute. The meanie.”

Okay. That was fine. Spirit shifted nervously as the coffee brewed, glancing at the clock. Five minutes. I’m screwed.

Then he glanced over at Azusa, who was giving Blair and him a disapproving look. He could already hear her lecture in his head—“Do you really let an escort babysit your daughter?! What the hell are you thinking?! Blah blah blah blah blah—”

Blair was a damn good babysitter, and he’d fight anyone who said otherwise. And if Azusa was
really going to complain, well…

“Azusa, are you working today?” he asked.

“Huh?” She glanced at him. “No, I have the day off.”

“Completely off?”

“Yes, I’m mainly trying to get some work done-”

“Awesome! Could you watch Maka for me?”

Visible alarm spread across her face. “Er- I could, but I’m not very good with children-”

“You’ll do fine. Maka’s real easy to take care of.” There. Problem solved. And Spirit knew she’d do just fine watching Maka-- he at least trusted her to do it right. Maka would be fine. He gulped down the last of his coffee, grabbed his bag and headed out the door, pressing another kiss on top of Maka’s head as he went. She looked up at him quizzically as he left. “Be good for Azusa kiddo. Thanks! Gotta go, bye!”

“Good luck, tomcat!” Blair called cheerfully after him.

“Spirit-!” Azusa’s voice shrieked angrily after him as he fled out the door.

He literally sprinted to the bus stop, but he still missed his bus.

And when he flipped out his phone to call a cab or an Uber or something, his battery had died on the spot. Apparently he’d forgotten to charge it the night before.

Which was just as well, because he’d forgotten his wallet too in his haste. He wouldn’t be able to pay for a ride anyway.

He almost started crying right there on the sidewalk, but at the last second managed to reel himself in to tell himself that it was fine. It was fine. He could still make it. He’d just walk.

Walk to the building that was more than five miles away. With a hangover that was probably going to kill him. In freaking 90 degree heat, since June Gloom was already fading out, and summer weather had finally started settling in for the season.

Yeah, he was definitely going to start crying at some point.

An hour later found him wandering aimlessly in a part of town he didn’t know, completely lost. He could feel the sweat stains underneath his suit jacket, and his stomach was flipping up and down and inside out.

He was officially twenty minutes late for his interview.

He was screwed.

“Hey, kid!” An alarmed voice cut off his slowly-building meltdown. “Get out of the road!”

Almost immediately, he noticed the boy standing in the road, right off the edge of the sidewalk several feet in front of him. He was dark-haired, and looked around Maka’s age. He was wearing a mini white dress shirt, black slacks, and shoes. Cars whizzed past in front of him in random intervals, and to Spirit’s horror the kid kept leaning out into the road, peering down at the asphalt
with a small scowl.

“Hey!” The voice came from a man standing on the other side of the road standing next to what looked like his wife. Both looked panicked—the wife waving her arms to get the boy’s attention.

Then the boy stepped into the road, just as a car’s horn blared.

Spirit moved faster than he ever had in his life, save for a few times when Maka was just starting to learn how to walk and nearly bashed her head open against the corner of a wall. He grabbed the boy by his collar and toppled backwards, the front of the car barely missing the child by what looked like a hair.

He fell hard onto the concrete, landing flat on his ass and the contents of his bag practically exploding onto the sidewalk. The boy squirmed a bit in his grasp, looking completely unaffected by the fact that he had nearly just been creamed by a car.

“Let me go,” he whined.

“What were you doing?” Spirit snarled, quickly gathering up his belongings after letting go of the boy to do so—

—who immediately gave Spirit a heart attack all over again by bolting back towards the road.

“Hey!” He stumbled forward and to his feet to grab the boy’s arm again, and ow ow ow ow fuck—a surge of stinging pain erupted from his lower spine, enough that when he moved it hurt like hell.

“Let me go!” the boy repeated, this time as a shriek. “The lines on the street are crooked! I need to fix them!”

“Hey, hey, calm down!” Spirit hissed, legs wobbling under his weight. Fuck fuck fuck, it hurt. “Y-you can’t just run out in the street! Where are your parents?!"

The boy looked like he was going to start shrieking before suddenly, he calmed. His eyes narrowed as he looked up at him. It was almost unnerving how quickly his mood shifted—he went from on the verge of screaming his head off to carefully inspecting Spirit like he had a third head.

“You’re uneven,” The little boy declared with a scowl, as if he was declaring that Spirit had toe fungus or some other disgusting disease. “Can I fix you?”

“Uh…” Spirit glanced at the couple across the street in hope for some sort of help, but they were just going on their merry way, already halfway down the street. Typical.

There wasn’t anyone else in sight that looked like they could be looking for the boy. A few passersby gave them curious glances, but nothing else. He had a sinking feeling that this kid was lost, and whoever might be looking for him weren’t going to find him soon.

“Sure,” he finally said, mainly in an attempt to appease the kid as his mind reeled, desperately trying to figure out what to do. “What do you want me to do?”

The boy just gave him a disapproving look.

Spirit hovered awkwardly for a few seconds, before kneeling down as far as he could without feeling another surge of pain. “Look, kid-ack!”

Almost immediately, the boy grabbed the strands of hair on either side of his face and yanked hard.
Spirit lost his balance and fell over, but the boy visibly relaxed as he began to carefully arrange Spirit’s hair. Spirit sat there, patiently, all the while trying hard to grit his teeth so that he didn’t let out the string of cuss words that were threatening to escape his lips at the sheer amount of pain he was in. All the while, he kept glancing around for what looked like this boy’s parents. No luck. There was no sign of anyone who was with him, or who was looking for him.

That didn't bode well.

When the boy finished rearranging his hair he immediately adjusted Spirit’s collar, his tie, and straightened his jacket. Afterwards he leaned back, carefully expecting his handiwork, before frowning.

“Your sweat stains aren’t symmetrical,” The boy noted.

“Alright, enough with that.” Trying to ignore the stabbing feelings of guilt and self-deprecation, Spirit got to his feet. Immediately, he winced as his backside throbbed painfully, his stomach churned, and his head spun like a record player. Whoa… “Urgh-- alright, where are your parents kid? Do you know?”

“They’re not symmetrical,” The boy repeated, staring pointedly at Spirit’s armpits. To Spirit’s dismay, he was starting to look upset again.

*For f*uck’s sake. Spirit buttoned up his suit jacket over his dress shirt, hoping that it would conceal the sweat stains. He probably should have done that earlier, come to think of it. “Better?”

The boy didn’t look completely satisfied, but he nodded anyway, much to Spirit’s relief.

“Awesome.” He tried not to sound sarcastic. “Are you out here by yourself?”

The boy blinked. “Um...no, my brother should...” He peered around, as if he was suddenly noticing that he was by himself. His eyes went wide, suddenly panicked and frightened. “Where did he go? He was right here--"

“Hey, it’s okay,” Spirit tried to reassure him.

“Where did he go?” The boy repeated frantically, head whipping around desperately. “Oh no, oh no, he’s gone, he left me-"

His breaths immediately started to come out in short, panicked bursts, and tears pooled in his eyes.

“Hey, hey...” Spirit tried to soothe, somewhat desperately. Dealing with a meltdown would make things ten times harder, especially if this kid got set off as easily as he was starting to suspect he did.

His mind raced. Obviously, this kid was lost. Obviously, he wouldn’t be able to find his parents on his own. Which meant that Spirit needed to take him to find his parents, or at least to a police station.

Which meant he’d probably miss his interview completely. As well as an opportunity to get a well-paying job immediately after graduation to help support his daughter.

Spirit took a deep breath, practically willing himself to not start crying on the spot. Sure he’d probably still get work after he graduated, but he had an opportunity for a really, really good job if he got accepted into this internship. And he had totally blown it because he couldn’t get his shit together.
Well get it together now, idiot. There’s a little kid here that probably needs help. Think of it this way-- if you hadn’t been late, he probably would have been hit by that car.

“Calm down, it’s okay.” Do not burst into tears, do not burst into tears, focus on the task at hand. “I’ll help you find him. What does he look like?”

The boy sniffed, rubbing his hands across his eyes. “H-h-he’s really asymmetrical.”

Spirit waited for a further description, but got none as the kid continued to whimper.

“What’s the color of his hair?” Spirit pressed.

“D-dyed. Asymmetrical.”

“What was he wearing?”

“A suit. An asymmetrical one.”

“What’s the color of his suit?” Spirit tried again, almost pleading at this point.

“Incarnadine.”

“Incarnawhat?”

“Incarnadine. That’s the color of his suit.”

“And...what color is that? Maybe red? It sounds like red. But it also sounds a bit like it could be blue. Or a really, really obscure green.

“Incarnadine.” The boy gave him an exasperated look.

Spirit gave up. “Okay, do you know where the nearest police station is?”

“U-um-” The boy looked thoughtful for a minute, before pointing across the intersection. “That way.”

“Great! Do you have a number you can give them to call? Your parents’ number, maybe?”

The boy nodded, almost immediately. “424-2564.”

“Awesome. I’ll walk you to the police station, okay? They’ll help you get home. And who knows? Your brother might be there too. I’m sure he’s looking for you.”

And maybe, Spirit thought, with a small flicker of hope, just maybe, by the grace of a million gods, I might be able to salvage this interview.

The boy’s lip wobbled. “No, he’s not.”

“Of course he is! He’s your brother. Why wouldn’t he be?”

The boy crossed his arms in front his chest and refused to answer.

“Okay.” Spirit frowned. That was... troubling, to say the least. “Do you know if your parents will pick you up, then?”

“Father would,” The boy mumbled.
Alright. We’ll make sure he picks you up then.” And maybe have a bit of a talk, if your brother’s regularly leaving you to run out into the street. Spirit smiled down at the boy. “Okay? You’re going to be fine.”

The boy sniffed. “Okay.”

“What’s your name?”

The kid glanced at him a little warily before answering. “Kid.”

Spirit wasn’t sure if he heard that right. “Kid?”

“Like Billy the Kid.” Poor little guy sounded resigned, as if he was used to this reaction. Still, who named their kid ’Kid’? Spirit himself wasn’t that creative with names. He had a goldfish named Goldie once, a stuffed teddy bear named Teddy, and Kami had specifically been the one to name Maka. But ’Kid’ was just a whole other level of unoriginal.

Still, it didn’t really matter. “Alright Kid. I don’t know this part of town very well, so you gotta be the one to lead us to the police station. Okay?”

Kid nodded, wiping the last of his tears away and visibly steeling himself. “Okay. I don’t think it’s far.”

“Even better! Let’s go.”

Kid suddenly scowled at him.

What?”

“Your hair’s uneven again,” Kid practically growled, pointing. “The wind messed it all up.”

Spirit sighed. “Do you want to fix it?”

Kid nodded eagerly, and Spirit, obediently kneeled down and tried not to cry out in pain to let him fix it.

Kid insisted he knew where he was going, but Spirit was increasingly doubting him by the second. He had been following the boy around for what had to be the past hour, and at that point Spirit was almost positive they were going in circles. It didn’t help that he could barely walk either—he was pretty sure he bruised his tailbone, or lower spine or something when he had fallen earlier, because after a while it hurt so much that he was literally hobbling instead of walking. Not to mention he was still a bit dizzy and nauseous— but if he didn’t go too fast, he was pretty sure he wouldn’t puke or something.

“Kid?” he asked, trying no to sound desperate. “Are you sure you know where the police station is?”

Kid nodded vehemently. “Yes. It’s just farther than I thought it was.”

“I thought you said it was pretty close. Didn’t you?”

Kid scowled. “Not that one. We’re going to the other one.”
“There’s two?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, where’s the closer one?”

“We can’t go to that one!”

“Why? What’s wrong with that one?”

“The street it’s on is asymmetrical. It’s disgusting. The other one is much more aesthetically pleasing.”

Spirit stopped in his tracks. He could feel Kid watching him quizzically as he took a deep breath, dragging one hand down his face from his forehead to his jaw.

“Alright,” he managed. “Do you want to get back to your dad or not?”

Kid scowled at him. “I do.”

“Then we gotta go to the closer police station. Okay?”

“No!” Kid immediately shrieked. “No no no!”

“Kid, come on,” Spirit pleaded. Please, for the love of everything sacred, do not freak out on me.

Too late. Kid was freaking the fuck out, throwing himself on the ground and screaming at the top of his lungs. Spirit’s head throbbed at the noise, forcing him to rub his temples. Passersby gave him a sympathetic look as they walked past, probably assuming that Kid was his child throwing a tantrum.

“Kid please,” he tried, pleadingly.

To his surprise, Kid stopped screaming. But his eyes were focused across the street, wide and comprehending.

“FATHER!” Kid yelled excitedly, scrambling to his feet, and making a beeline towards the road.

Oh please not again- “KID NO!”

Too late. Kid bolted into the street, Spirit following hot on his heels. A Prius screeched to a halt right in front of him, blasting it’s horns loudly.

Spirit didn’t even have time to apologize. He was starting to think Kid had a death wish or something, as he kept running into the fucking road, and was completely ignoring the cars that screeched to a halt around him blaring their horns. The world tilted slightly as he ran after Kid, trying his best to ignore all of the angry drivers-

-then a heavy, enormous force rammed into him and sent him flying.

It took him a minute to comprehend what had just happened as he regained his bearings on the asphalt.

He’d just been hit by a car.

“Hey asshole!” A voice that must have belonged to the driver yelled. “Control your fucking kid!”
Kid! Spirit scrambled to his feet, remembering the stupid, dumbass kid he possibly wrecked his future for and whoa. The world tilted dangerously far, his shoulder and backside throbbed, and Spirit felt himself stumble.

“You okay man?” Another voice yelled, sounding much more panicked than the first.

Spirit gave a shaky thumbs-up and stumbled forward. His stomach twisted inside out as he felt someone grab his arm and yank him onto the sidewalk. Soon enough he was face-to-face with a man about twenty years or so older than him, with salt-and-pepper hair and piercing gold eyes that tinged with concern.

Gold. Just like Kid’s.

Sure enough, when he looked down, Kid was clinging onto the man’s rather expensive-looking suit jacket, eyes wide.

“Are you alright?” The man--Kid’s father, Spirit assumed--asked, concern written all over his face.

“Hi,” Spirit managed, and then his stomach completely flipped and he lost his lunch on the spot.

He tried to turn so that it didn’t get on the man, but he was pretty sure some of it got on him anyway.

“Fuck,” he groaned when he finished, wiping his mouth as he let himself stumble and sit onto the sidewalk.

“Are you okay?” he heard Kid ask in a small voice.

Spirit gave another thumbs-up before holding his pounding head in his hand, trying to focus on making the world appear less dizzying than it was at the moment. Stupid fucking fancy alcohol.

“Give him space Kid,” he heard Kid’s father say.

Spirit inhaled, and exhaled several times. Slowly, the world came back into focus, and his stomach settled. He started to become more aware of the throbbing pain in his side and shoulder in addition to his backside.

“Feeling better?” He jumped a bit at the voice.

When he looked up, Kid’s father was looking down at him. His smile was cheerful, but a bit strained, and if he was trying very, very hard not to grimace.

And immediately, Spirit realized why. His shoes, which looked just as expensive and well-kept as the rest of his suit and oddly billowy trenchcoat, were splattered with Spirit’s sick.

“Oh god,” Spirit choked out, positive at this point he’d never been more mortified in his entire life. “I am so sorry.”

“Ah, it’s alright.” Spirit thought he saw the man’s eye twitch. Which was never generally a good sign. “Don’t-don’t worry about it.”

“I can get them cleaned,” Spirit offered, head spinning. “Or I can clean them for you-”

“Don’t worry about it,” the man repeated. “You uh-seem like you’re having a bit of a rough day.”
That’s a hell of an understatement. “You-you’re his father right?” Spirit gestured to Kid. Just to clarify, because Kid just happening to see his father across the street just seemed awfully convenient.

“Yes I am.”

Spirit sighed in relief. Maybe miracles did happen after all. “Oh thank god.”

The man’s brows furrowed. Was he wearing eyeliner? Spirit couldn’t quite tell if it was eyeliner or if his eyes just naturally looked like they were ringed in black. Maybe it was his eyelashes. Weird.

“So why exactly were you with my son? Are you a friend of Asura’s?”

“Asura?” Spirit repeated, not sure if he heard that right, since his mind immediately went to the book on Hindu mythology he read to Maka once. “Like the angry Indian gods?”

The man’s brows furrowed even further. “What-no.”

“Oh.” Spirit’s vision was clearing—that was a good sign. He glanced over at Kid peeping out behind his father’s coattails. “Well, no. I’m not. Your son was wandering around alone and I was trying to find a police station to drop him off at.”

“What?” The man’s eyes went wide and he glanced down at Kid. “Is this true?”

Kid just nodded.

“You were alone?” The man looked extremely alarmed. “Where’s your brother? How long ago was this? I just talked to him on the phone, why-?”

Kid shrugged, glancing down at the ground.

His father sighed, briefly before turning back to Spirit. “Well thank you, Mister-?”

“Albarn.” Spirit attempted to get to his feet to shake his hand, but the world suddenly swooped and he had to sit down again. “F-uh, crap. Crud. Sorry.”

“Do you need me call the hospital?” the man asked.

Spirit frowned. Sure, he had just thrown up all over the sidewalk and he was a little dizzy, but going to the hospital seemed a little excessive. “No. Why?”

The man gave him a look like he was insane. “You do know you just got hit by a car, right?”

Oh, yeah.

His shoulder and ribs throbbed painfully at the reminder, along with his lower back. Maybe getting that checked out was a good idea. But he really, really didn’t want to bug this guy any more than he had to. He already puked on his shoes, after all.

Also, he really didn’t want to go to a doctor. He hated hospitals. Not to mention it was usually expensive, and he usually reserved going to the doctor’s for either emergencies or anything involving Maka. Maybe he’d just talk to Nygus when he got back. She was in nursing school, right?

“It’s okay.” Spirit wobbled a bit as he tried to stand. He grasped at the first thing offered to him for support-- namely the man’s arm, which was offered to him as soon as he stood. “Oh-thanks.”
“You should probably sit down-aha. Over here.”

Spirit felt another flush of embarrassment as the man led him over to a nearby bench and made him sit down, ignoring his protests.

“I’m fine-”

“Oh, I’m sure.” That was blatant sarcasm. “Now, is there anyone you'd like to call?”

“It’s fine-”

“Mr. Albarn. You just got hit by a car and threw up on the side of the road. I don’t know what the hell you were doing or where you were going, but nevertheless, I can see you helped my son. I think I owe ya one.”

“Call me Spirit. And I mean…” Spirit trailed off, gesturing at the man’s now-ruined shoes.

The man sighed. “I said not to worry about it. It’s… no big deal.” He looked physically pained to say it.

“Can I just... borrow your phone?” Spirit asked. At this point, he was just going to call someone to pick him up. Probably Azusa, because she was the only one he knew was free at this time. Either way, he was done. It hurt to sit down, it hurt to walk, he had just gotten hit by a fucking car, and all he wanted to do was to go home. “To call someone to pick me up?”

“Sure.” The man rummaged around in his pocket and passed him his phone after unlocking it for him-- it wasn’t a sleek, expensive-looking one like Spirit had sort of expected, but a bit older. It was still better than his phone-- though, granted, probably everything was better than an old flip phone that had cost literally twenty bucks.

“Hello?” Azusa picked up at the first ring after he'd dialed her number.

“Hey,” Spirit managed, wincing when he realized he was probably never going to hear the end of it once Azusa found out what had happened.

“Spirit?” She sounded surprised. “Are you using someone else’s phone?”

“Mine died. Could you do me a favor and pick me up?”

“Uh.” Was it just him or did Azusa sound a bit panicked. “Is your interview over?”

“Uh- no, not exactly.” It probably would have been by now, Spirit thought, somewhat sadly. “Can you just pick me up?”

“Where are you?”

“Uh…” Spirit blanked, before the man whispered the address to him. “Oh-” He repeated it into the mouthpiece. “Got it?”

“Okay.” It wasn’t his imagination. Azusa definitely sounded panicked. “Give me a minute. I’ll be right over.”

“It’s something wrong?”

“No! No. Not at all. Give me a few minutes.”
She hung up before Spirit could call her out on her terrible attempt at lying.

“Thanks.” Spirit said to the man, handing back his phone.

“No problem! Who did you call?”

“My roommate.”

“Is she coming to pick you up?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re uneven again,” Kid whined to Spirit, his cheek pressed against the side of his father's arm.

“Kid,” his father sighed.

“It’s fine.” In the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t a big deal. If there was anything successful about today, it was that Kid hadn’t been hit by a car and that Spirit wasn’t dead. “Go ahead.”

Kid eagerly moved to plop himself between Spirit and his father on the bench, immediately setting to work in rearranging Spirit’s hair again. Spirit noticed in mild horror that the man was pulling an embroidered handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe at his shoes.

“Uh-I have wipes,” Spirit offered somewhat frantically, digging around in his bag. He’d been carrying around baby wipes since Maka had been born, and even though she was older and he didn’t have to worry about getting spit-up on his clothes or anything, it had become a habit. They did come in handy sometimes. “Here.”

“Oh! Good.” The man looked immensely relieved as he took the pack. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for helping you clean up my puke.” Spirit grimaced. “Really. I’m so sorry.”

“Eh.” The man shrugged. “Y’know, these shoes have seen worse.”

“Yeah right.”

“No really. They have. I’m not exaggerating.”

“Really?” Spirit couldn’t think of anything worse than puke. Actually, he could, but he didn’t want to dwell on it for too long. “You know what, don’t tell me.”

“Don’t move,” Kid grumbled to Spirit as his father actually let out a light chuckle. “You keep moving.”

“Sorry,” Spirit said obediently.

“Don’t scold him, Kid,” the man chastised. “I’m sure you already put him through enough.”

You have no fucking idea, Spirit wanted to say, but for obvious reasons chose not to.

Baby wipes definitely worked miracles. Soon enough, the man’s shoes were clean, almost spotless in fact, and he looked pretty satisfied.

As soon as his shoes were clean and he sat back down next to Spirit, an awkward silence ensued. Spirit focused mainly on watching Kid, who was carefully arranging every single strand of hair on Spirit’s head. A gust of a breeze suddenly swept in, ruffling Spirit’s hair enough that his progress
was ruined. Spirit couldn’t help but chuckle a bit at Kid’s horrified squawk before he frantically worked to fix the damage that was done.

“So,” The man cut, somewhat awkwardly. “Spirit, is it?”

“That’s me.” Yeah. Definitely a little bit awkward. “I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Oh! That’s because I never said it. Where are my manners? Call me Shinigami.” He stuck his hand out.

“Shinigami?” Spirit repeated, not sure if he had heard that right.

“That’s my name,” Shinigami said defensively.

“Alright. Nice to meet you.” Spirit took the offered hand and shook it. “Are you Japanese?”

“Pardon?”

“Shinigami’s Japanese isn’t it? Basically another version of the Grim Reaper, right?”

“Oh! Yes, it is. I do have a bit on my father’s side, but that’s it. It’s a nickname.”

“Ah. That’s neat.”

“Thank you. I rather like it myself.”

Another awkward pause.

“Done,” Kid announced proudly before settling back in between the two men.

“Thanks Kid,” Spirit said.

“You’re welcome.” Kid gave him a stern look. “Now don’t mess it all up.”

“I won’t.” Spirit raised his left hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“That’s the wrong way to do it,” Shinigami observed.

“Really?”

“You’re supposed to raise three fingers, not your whole hand.”

“Oh. Were...you in the Scouts?”

“My oldest was,” Shinigami replied. “Though I’ll be the first to admit it didn’t quite stick. Honestly I think I got more out of it than he did.”

Spirit smiled a bit at that. “Are he and Kid your only kids?”

“Oh, no. I have two other daughters.”

“Liz and Patty,” Kid supplied.

“Yes. Here-” Shinigami pulled a wallet from his pocket and flipped it open.

Inside was a picture of Kid, all dressed up in a white tuxedo. On either side of them stood a blond-haired little girl, one taller than him with long hair and one shorter than him with cropped hair.
They wore matching red dresses.

“Aren’t they cute?” Shinigami said proudly.

“Father,” Kid groaned, covering his face.

“They’re adorable!”

“Thank you. Ah, I probably shouldn’t bore you to death with pictures of my kids.”

“Oh no it’s fine, I get it! I wish I hadn’t forgotten my wallet, I’d show you a picture of my little girl too.”

“You have a daughter?” Faint surprise flashed across Shinigami’s face.

“Yep! About the same age as yours. My little Maka.” Spirit decided not to be offended at Shinigami’s obvious surprise. He was sort of used to people assuming he was Maka’s babysitter or her older brother, instead of her father. It was irritating sometimes, but it wasn’t the worst thing in the world.

And to his credit, he seemed to be bouncing back pretty quickly. “Well, she sounds adorable.”

“She is! She’s got cute little pigtails, and I got her a pair of little red shoes the other week that she looks so adorable in. I’ve used up all the pictures on my Polaroid already!”

“Oh, I used to have to buy memory card after memory card for my camera when I first brought Kid home,” Shinigami said fondly. “Same when I adopted Liz and Patty.”

“It’s hard to get just one picture, though. In fact, there’s no possible way.”

“Very true! Very, very true.” Shinigami actually bounced in his seat excitedly as he spoke. “So, what brought you here?”

“What?”

“Where were you headed when you came across Kid?” Shinigami patted his son on the back affectionately, who looked up at him and gave him a grin. “I thought I overheard something about an interview. New job?”

Ugh. Spirit did not really want to go through this topic. “No. For an internship.”

“Ah.” Shinigami frowned, probably sensing Spirit’s bad mood about the subject. “Go badly?”

Spirit cringed, trying not to glance down at Kid. “Uh-I missed it actually. Missed it completely.”

“Oh.” Realization dawned, and the man looked guilty. “I’m so sorry-”

“No big deal.” Lie. “I probably would have missed it anyway, I missed my bus.” Not a lie. Not completely anyway-he at least would have been completely late. “Don’t worry about it.”

“What was it for?”

“Ever heard of Morton Industries?”

The man’s eyebrows raised, as if this was a revelation. Which was a bit weird. “Yes.”
“Well. There you go.”

“Hm.” The man blinked. “I see.”

“It’s a good company.”

“That’s what people say.” The man eyed him. “You’re in college?”

“Yes.”

“Business major?”

“Yes, yes.”

“And you have a daughter.” Shinigami whistled. “That’s quite a load.”

“Yeah, well.” Spirit shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“And you wanted to balance an internship on top of that?”

“It’s a good internship. I’m hoping to start work after school ends, and it might help me get a position at that company.”

Shinigami looked thoughtful. He scrutinized Spirit for a bit, golden eyes holding Spirit’s gaze with ease.

Which, after a couple of seconds, made Spirit a bit uncomfortable.

A honk made him jump. When he turned around, he saw Azusa’s pristine white Audi parked at the corner.

“That’s my ride.” Miraculously, the world didn’t turn in on itself as he stood. “Thanks for everything.”

“You’re the one who helped my son,” Shinigami replied, flashing him a peace sign. Kid visibly rolled his eyes at this. “And skipped your internship interview for it. If anyone’s doing the thanking…” He trailed off. “Listen. What’s your phone number?”

Spirit’s brows shot up. Not that he was complaining per se, but he had literally just puked on this man’s shoes. “You want my number?”

Shinigami blinked. “Oh- uh- no. I mean-you see, I actually work at Morton’s.”

His brows shot up even further. “Wait-really?”

“Yes! And if you want, I might be able to get you another interview.”

Now his brows were way up. And he was spluttering a bit. “Wait, what?”

Shinigami just shrugged. “Hey, I owe you one! It’s no big deal.”

Holy shit.

Holy fucking shit.

“You-you’d do that?”
“Yep!”

“Why?!”

“Again-- I owe you one,” Shinigami said brightly. “Also, it does feel as though someone should throw you a bone. You did get hit by a car and puked all over the sidewalk.”

“Yeah, I’m- not usually this much of a mess,” Spirit stammered.

Which was definitely a lie, but Shinigami didn’t need to know that. Especially if he was really going to get him another interview.

“Here.” Shinigami stood, Kid being pulled up along with him, and pulled a pen out of his pocket. He took Spirit’s hand and scribbled a set of numbers on Spirit’s wrist. “Text me to give me your number, and I’ll see what I can do. I won’t get you the internship, but I can get you the interview.”

“Thank you,” was all Spirit could manage in response, choking out the words feebly with as much sincerity he could muster. He was trying very, very hard not to burst into relieved tears, but it was difficult, he could feel moisture pooling up in his eyes.

“No problem.” If Shinigami noticed, he didn’t seem unnerved, he just flashed him another peace sign. “Hope to hear from you soon!”

“Okay,” Spirit said lamely, watching the two of them walk away.

“Bye Mr. Albarn.” Kid waved at him as they left.

Spirit was left standing there in a dumbfounded, excited daze with his head still spinning a bit and his backside throbbing.

He was pulled from his reverie by Azusa honking her horn.

“Alright, jeez,” He muttered under his breath, turning heel and limping towards the Audi.

“Are you okay?” Azusa eyed him warily as he flopped down into the front seat. “Were you crying?”

“Got hit by a car,” Spirit answered, wiping his eyes quickly. “But I’m okay.”

“What?” Azusa near-shrieked, making his ears ring.

“Can you not?” he managed.

“You got hit by a car?!”

“Yeah.” And he was quite a bit of pain at this point, but if there was going to be a big fuss then Spirit didn’t even want to bother. He didn't want anything to ruin his mood. “Relax, I’m fine. Nothing a little ice can’t fix.”

“Oh my god-” She was cut off by her phone buzzing, and almost immediately she snatched it from the center console.

Spirit saw her eyes widen in relief, and saw a glimpse of the text message.

Stein: found maka, she is fine
Wait.

*What?*

“What’s that?” Spirit asked frantically. “Was that about Maka?”

“It’s fine.” At least she sounded sincere this time. “It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

“Bullshit. What happened?”

Azusa winced, biting her lower lip. “When I wasn’t looking... Maka climbed through the fire escape. When you called I was looking for her-”

“What?! Is she okay?!”

“She’s fine! She’s fine, calm down-”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! How could you lose her?! Why would she climb through the fire escape?!”

“I don’t know!” Azusa looked genuinely guilty, which manage to somewhat tamper Spirit's angry panic. “Ask her when we get back! But she’s okay! Stein’s with her.”

He hated how that triggered immediate fear. The horrifying what-if scenarios of what Stein might do to his daughter, the idea of his little girl terrified-

*I’m being stupid. Stein wouldn’t do that. Not after having been to jail.*

“Let’s get home.” Spirit tried not to sound as panicked as he actually was.

“We will.” Either he didn’t, or Azusa was chalking it up to anxiety over Maka getting lost outside the apartment. And that certainly didn’t help either. She shifted the car’s gears, and flicked on her turn signal.

“Quickly.”

This time she did look at him quizzically. But again, she didn’t ask questions. “Alright.”

Maka was fine. She sat next to Stein at the kitchen table, staring down at her hands, obviously knowing she was in trouble. Which was an *immense* relief. The last thing he wanted to deal with was more missing children, especially his own.

“What happened?” Spirit demanded, rushing over and kneeling down next to her, tilting up her head and checking her for injuries. “Are you okay? Maka, what were you *thinking*?”

“I’m sorry, Papa,” Maka replied sullenly. “It wasn’t Azusa’s fault.”

“I know, it’s okay. But you gave her a scare. Where did you go?”

“She was wandering around an alley a couple blocks down,” Stein said. Spirit flinched a little at his voice, but tried to focus on the matter at hand.

“What were you doing?”

“Playing with Crona,” Maka said sincerely.
Spirit resisted the urge to beat his head against the wall.

Crona was Maka’s imaginary friend. At least, that’s what Spirit assumed. He’d never actually seen the kid, but he heard Maka talk to them in her room, but whenever he opened the door or walked in no one would be there.

Lately Crona had been “pressuring” Maka to make some poor decisions lately. Like climb onto the fire escape unsupervised, for one. Maka claimed it was so that they could have a better conversation.

Spirit knew that it was better to let these sorts of things just come to pass, to not say anything or do anything to burst her bubble, but this was almost a deal-breaker.

Almost.

“You know you can’t leave the apartment without someone with you,” Spirit said sternly. “Especially not through the fire escape. I’ve been telling you this, kiddo.”

“I know,” Maka replied glumly.

“No library visits for a couple weeks. Okay?”

Maka nodded.

“Good.” Spirit hobbled a bit as he stood up again. “Okay, I need to sit down now-”

“Are you alright, senpai?” Stein asked.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not!” Azusa said vehemently. “You got hit by a car!”

“You what?” That was Stein.

Maka gasped.

“I’m fine-”

“You can barely walk,” Azusa snapped. “You should go to the hospital.”

“No no no, that’s fine-” Spirit tried.

“You might be hurt Papa!” Maka protested.

“You can barely walk,” Stein added. “You should at least go in to make sure you’re not badly hurt. Or I could give you an inspection-”

“No.” Spirit cut him off immediately, angrily. “No, you are not doing that! What is wrong with you?!”

He didn’t even realize how upset he sounded until he realized Azusa and Maka were staring at him.

Stein didn’t even bat an eyelash. “Hospital, then.”

“Isn’t Nygus in nursing school?” Spirit asked, somewhat desperately. “I’m sure she’ll have an idea
“what to do.”
“A hospital would be better.”
“Okay. Let me make this point: hospital bills.”
“Ah.” Stein blinked. “Good point.”
“Thank you.”
“I’ll call Nygus then.” Azusa whipped out her phone, scowling a little as she dialed. “Just- sit down.”
“Fine.” If anything, Spirit was immediately grateful to collapse into the nearest chair.

*What a day.*

“You broke your butt.”

Maka let out a giggle, which she quickly smothered when she saw Spirit glare at Sid. The three of them were sitting on the new couch, with Spirit on an icepack and some shitty Lifetime movie blaring in the background. Nygus had been pretty adamant about Spirit sitting on an icepack on a fixed schedule, which meant he was stuck indoors until he could walk properly again. He bruised the hell out of his shoulder too, which also meant he had to put some ice there too.

“I did not,” Spirit snapped.

Sid was wearing the biggest shit-eating grin Spirit had ever seen. “You did. That’s amazing.”

“I didn’t even break anything! I bruised my tailbone!”

“That’s called breaking your butt.”

“No, it’s not!”

“Maybe, but that’s what I’m calling it.”

“Oh my god.” Spirit gave up.

Sid’s smile wavered a bit. “Though it does suck you missed the interview.”

Shinigami’s offer replayed in his head—the suggestion of getting him another interview. But that was a few days ago. Spirit had texted him, but had gotten no response. He hadn’t heard from him since.

“Yeah,” was all he said in response.

“Can we watch something else?” Maka whined. “This movie’s dumb.”

“It is not,” Sid said, sounding almost offended.

“Yeah it is.”

“No, it’s not. Spirit, please properly educate your daughter on quality television.”

“I have,” Spirit responded flatly. “She knows what she’s talking about. Can we change the
channel?"

“No way!”

“Sid, I’m wounded,” Spirit pressured. “I have nothing to do but sit on an ice pack all day. Surely you have pity for the invalids?”

“You’re not an invalid, you’re an idiot. An idiot who broke his butt.”

“Hey-”

“Spirit, your damn cell phone’s ringing!” Azusa barged in irritably, effectively destroying whatever sort of peace was currently hovering over them.

“Language!” Maka snapped.

“Oh-sorry.” Azusa’s face softened briefly before contorting back into irritation as she passed the vibrating phone to Spirit. “Just answer your freaking phone, and stop leaving it everywhere!”

Sid watched her as she stomped away. “Jeez, someone has her panties in a twist.”

Spirit wasn’t listening.

The contact was practically glowing from his phone screen, a contact that was possibly the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

Morton Industries.

His heartbeat sped up in excitement, a grin spread across his face, and he felt the overwhelming desire to stand up and do a happy dance. Which he would have, were he not wounded.

“Who’s-” Sid began, before Spirit shushed him.

“Be quiet.” Spirit answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Hello, we’re looking for a Spirit Albarn?”

Yup. A happy dance was definitely in order. “Speaking.”

Two weeks later, he’d get a call that he got the internship.

He loved it when the universe gave him a break.
Chapter 3

“-Now this book is really really long, but it has a lot of cool pictures! Not all of them are nice to look at, but I think you’d like them because they’re kinda scary. Papa says they’re not accurate, since this book was published a while before scientists figured out that dinosaurs had feathers, but it’s still really cool.”

Spirit stood at the doorway (which was nice, because he could finally stand without being in pain), watching the scene in front of him play out with some dismay. Maka had one of her dinosaur books open and propped up in her lap, angled so that Stein could see the pages, and had been chattering on for what felt like an eternity.

For the past few weeks while his stupid tailbone was healing up, he’d watched as Maka had shown Stein all her books, all her toys, told him every single thing that had happened in the past six months, and told him about seemingly every little thing that had happened in her life. She had told him about the dead cat she’d found on the fire escape once, the Easter egg hunt that Spirit had taken her to, back in April, the bird Spirit rescued from a gutter and had nursed back to health with her about a year ago, and so on and so forth.

Spirit knew that sometimes kids had phases where they’d attach themselves to a certain person, follow them around, and tell them about everything and anything they could think of. He’d hoped that if Maka ever had one, it’d be to him. Not Stein.

But to Stein’s credit, he mostly kept a distance. He didn’t even look at Maka half the time when she was talking, showed absolutely no interest at all in her. At least, not when Spirit was there, because he definitely was watching Maka like a hawk nowadays at all times. His lack of interest was relieving, but not completely convincing for Spirit’s taste. Marie also usually watched the two of them with a soft smile playing on her face, but she immediately looked away whenever Spirit met her eye. She was there now, wedging Stein between her and Maka on the couch.

It was undeniably awkward, if not extremely uncomfortable, having Stein under his roof. For the most part he tried to keep his distance, but Stein definitely did not. Sure, he displayed little to no interest and regard to the people around him, but at the same time he walked around the place like he’d been living there for years. On the very few occasions he had addressed Spirit, he’d done so as if they hadn’t not spoken to each other for the past five years, as if absolutely nothing had changed between them.

Which honestly made Spirit twitch a little. Or a lot. Even at the moment the atmosphere in the room was a bit tense-he was watching Stein and Maka from the doorway, and Marie’s eye kept flickering towards him and his daughter and her boyfriend. She was always there, always present whenever Spirit and Stein were in the same room together, like a referee waiting for a foul. Which definitely didn’t make for the communal vibe Azusa seemed to be gunning for, but what the hell was he supposed to do? Leave his daughter alone with a psycho?

No thanks, Spirit thought, as he watched Maka chatter on. I’d rather get hit by a car again.

“Papa also has a book about Jurassic Park,” Maka went on. “Have you seen it?”

“Yes I have,” Stein responded. Again, he wasn’t actually looking at her, and instead was seemingly engrossed in some weird forensics crime show that was playing on the TV.

“Well, it also talks about how the dinosaurs weren’t shown properly, but mainly in the movie.
There’s a lot of inaccurate science stuff in that movie too, mainly how the dinosaurs were cloned and stuff."

The sound of a brief commotion at the front door caught Spirit’s attention, and when he glanced at the entryway he saw Azusa struggling to carry what looked like a small but very heavy box.

“Do you need help?” Marie looked like she was about to get to her feet.

“I got it,” Azusa grunted, dragging herself forward and placing the box on the coffee table. It sent out a small billow of dust as it hit the wood.

“What’s in the box?” Spirit asked, gesturing.

“It’s the set of china I inherited from my grandmother. I thought I’d put it in the china cabinet.”

“China cabinet?”

Azusa pointed to the empty display case that was set up in the far corner of the room. It was a dark wood color, which went along with the dark browns and blues that made up the living room’s new color scheme.

“Oh. You know, I honestly forgot we got that.”

Azusa rolled her eyes. “Maka?”

“Yeah?” Maka blinked up at her.

“I got one more box to bring in, but when I do, would you like to help me arrange everything on the shelves and make it look nice?”

Spirit had noted that ever since the latest Crona incident, Azusa seemed to be making some effort to be nicer to Maka. Not that she ever wasn’t in the first place, but still. He wondered if it was because she felt guilty about inadvertently letting her crawl out of the fire escape and into the unknown. Which he actually sort of appreciated, in a way. It was nice to know that she did genuinely seem to care about Maka’s well-being, that she wasn’t just looking out for her because she felt she had to. Spirit didn’t think that was the case in the first place, since he’d figured out on day one that the Demon Queen had a soft side buried deep somewhere, but the thought had crossed his mind once or twice.

“Sure!” Maka replied eagerly. “Can we put some flowers in there too?”

“Well, they’ll probably just die. There’s no real point.”

“Oh.” Maka deflated.

“Or,” Azusa said quickly, before Spirit could shoot her a pointed glare. “We could get some fake flowers that look just like real ones. That way they won’t die, but it’ll look just as nice.”

Maka immediately perked up. “Okay! I think I might have some, actually. Papa got some to put in my basket for Easter last year. Remember, Stein? I told you about that.”

“Vaguely,” Stein replied. He still looked engrossed in the creepy crime show. “I do remember you saying you body-slammed another kid on an Easter egg hunt.”

“Wait, what?” Marie’s eye widened. “I think I missed that part.”
“His name was Ox,” Maka continued. “And yep! That’s what Papa said I did.”

“Why?” Marie asked.

Maka scowled. “He was going to get the last red egg.”

“So you body-slammed him?”

“Yep! As hard as I could!”

“That’s not a good thing Maka,” Azusa scolded. “You shouldn’t be body-slamming other kids just for candy.”

“But it was the last red egg!” Maka protested.

“It still wasn’t exactly the best course of action, kiddo.” Spirit knew he was probably obligated to agree with Azusa on this one, but at the same time he secretly remembered how the entire scene had been hilarious.

He’d never forget watching Maka, in her frilly easter dress and her pigtails adorned with bows, zero in on the bald bespectacled little boy about to pick up the last red egg-- that notably were the only ones that contained Reese’s Pieces, her favorite. He’ll never forget the way she narrowed her eyes, let out a loud, angry screech that could only be described as a war cry, before charging the poor kid and slamming into him with enough force that he was completely knocked off his feet, so that she could then pick up the red egg, drop it in her basket and continue on her merry way. Sure, he’d had to apologize to the understandably angry mother, and give Maka a talk on not physically harming other kids for the sake of candy, but ultimately Ox was fine and the whole spectacle was probably one of his favorite memories ever.

Maka pouted a bit. “But you don’t mind me reusing the flowers, right Papa?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll go get them then!” Maka scrambled off the couch and down the hallway to her and Spirit’s room.

“Okay,” Azusa replied somewhat lamely before turning on her heel, presumably to get the second box. Leaving Spirit alone, with Stein and Marie. The latter immediately focused on the blaring television again, and Stein didn’t even so much as twitch.

Luckily, just as Spirit was about to go in the other room to pretend to be busy, his phone buzzed in his back pocket. Letting out a small sigh of relief, he went ahead and answered, hoping that it was Blair. She’d borrowed some of Spirit’s clothes several days ago for an exclusive show she was doing (she’d gleefully withheld the details from him no matter how much he begged, only telling him that it was a private birthday party that he definitely wasn’t invited to), and Spirit was hoping to get one of his favorite shirts back. Though, knowing Blair, letting her borrow something and hoping she’d return it in anything less than six months later was probably a mistake.

“Hello?”

“Hey!” Spirit’s hopes for getting that shirt back died then and there when he heard the voice on the phone. It was only Kami.

Wait.
It was Kami.

“Hey!” Spirit responded gleefully. He got a quizzical look from Azusa, who was coming back through the door with the second, heavier looking box in her hands. “Maka! Mama’s on the phone!”

Almost immediately Maka came charging back into the living room, colliding into Azusa as she went. The box dropped like an anchor to the ground, and to Spirit’s mild horror, there was the sound of shattering glass from inside the cardboard.

“MAMA!” Maka near-shrieked, before screeching to a halt as soon as she realized what she had done.

Azusa stared, mouth open and gaping, at the box on the floor.

Oh boy. “Uh,” was all Spirit managed.

“That sucks,” Stein said, as monotonous as could be and still not even looking at what was happening. Out of the corner of his eye, Spirit saw Marie give him a scolding look.

“I’m so sorry.” Maka’s voice was small.

“Spirit?” That was Kami. “What just happened?”


Maka nodded sheepishly.

“It’s...fine.” Azusa’s eye visibly twitched. “It was only my grandmother’s china. No big deal.”


The only response he got was another eye twitch.

“Hello?”

“Sorry, we gotta take this. Come on Maka.”

Maka immediately followed him, hot on his heels as they made a break for their room and shut the door behind them.

“It was an accident,” she said guiltily.

“I know, it’s okay.” Spirit told her, hoping he sounded convincing.

“Hello?” Kami sounded impatient.

“Sorry!” Spirit pressed the speaker button. “Accidentally broke a plate.” Or several… “No biggie. You’re on speaker right now, by the way.”

“Oh! Is our kiddo there too?”

“Yes!” Maka shouted, excitement at talking to her mother overtaking her guilt almost immediately. “Hi Mama!”
“Hi sweetie!”

“Want to talk to her?” Spirit asked.

“Uh-huh!”

“Here she is,” Spirit said to Kami before passing the phone over to Maka.

“Hi, mama!” Maka flopped down onto her mattress, cradling Spirit’s cell phone next to her cheek. “Uh huh, I’m good. Yup! We did get new roommates.”

Spirit froze. *Shit.*

Knowing Maka, she was probably going to tell her mother everything, including Stein. Which wouldn’t go over well. It wasn’t as though Spirit wasn’t going to tell her— he technically had to, because Kami usually came over for the Fourth of July, which was right around the corner— but he didn’t want Maka to be the one to tell her.

“No, they’re pretty nice. Sid’s one of them...yeah! And there’s also Marie, and Azusa, and—”

Spirit quickly covered her mouth, muffling her words, before taking the phone and placing a hand on the speaker so that Kami couldn’t hear what they were saying.

“Papa, what are you doing?” Maka grumbled.

“Maka, can you do me a favor?” Spirit hissed.

Maka scowled. “What?”

“Don’t mention Stein right now. Okay?”

“Stein?” Maka blinked.

“Hello?” He could hear Kami’s faint voice coming through the speakers. “Maka?”

“Promise me you won’t mention Stein, okay?” Spirit pleaded.

“Why?”

“Hello?”

“Because Mama will get mad.”

“She will?” Maka frowned looked troubled. “Why? Wait- did Mama know Stein too?”

Spirit winced. “I’ll tell you later, okay? Please?”

“Hellooo?”

“Please, Maka,” Spirit begged. “Let me be the one to tell her. Okay?”

Maka looked like she wanted to protest, but she reluctantly nodded and went back to the phone.

“Sorry Mama, I’m here.” There was a pause. “Mama? Yeah, I’m here.”

Spirit let out a breath he’d barely realized he was holding. “Thank you,” he mouthed at Maka.
She just frowned at him, and he wilted a little on the inside. “Uh-huh…yeah.”

Their conversation went on for a while. Spirit sat around and waited, pulled out a book and flipped through a chapter he’d already read. Maka prattled on and on, cheering up a bit as she talked about how their apartment looked now, about Nygus, about Sid, about Azusa, about Marie, about Marie’s baby, about the dead cat again, and so on and so forth.

“Are you gonna call again soon, Mama?” Maka asked hopefully, swinging her legs a bit on the mattress.

Whatever Kami’s response was, Maka’s expression darkened. Spirit watched with a flicker of concern as Maka went still, absolutely still.


Another stretch of silence.


Maka handed him the phone before heading out of the room. To Spirit’s shock, the door slammed behind her.

“Hey,” He said awkwardly into the receiver. Briefly, he pulled it away from his ear to glance at the timestamp for their call.

**36:11**

“*Hey,*” Kami responded. She suddenly sounded tired.

“What happened?”

“I told her I can’t come down for Fourth of July. *”

“...Oh.” Spirit’s heart sank. “Really? You can’t?”

“No. Things at work are really busy, and I don’t think I’ll have time.”

Well. Maybe he wouldn’t have to worry about Stein then.

“Your boss really won’t give you a few days off?”

“No. I’m sorry, *Spirit.*”

“It’s fine.” Nevertheless, he still felt sort of crestfallen. And he knew that Maka was probably devastated. “I’ll talk to Maka. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“I feel awful,” Kami said, softly. “I know I haven’t been around to talk much.”

“It’s okay, I know you’ve been busy.” *For three months straight, apparently.* Spirit immediately pushed those thoughts back. Kami was busy, and he knew that. She was working on a PhD. She was at freaking Harvard. Everything would change once they graduated, once they got married. They just had to hold out a little longer.

*Married.* The word sent nervous little pangs around Spirit’s insides. Not the fluttery butterflies, but sharp throbs of anxiety that almost felt like stabs.
“I still feel bad,” Kami was going on. “I know I didn’t come to the fireworks last year, and I know I promised I’d come this year.”

“Hey, you’re working hard. Maka knows that. I know that. So don’t beat yourself up over it, okay? Maybe you can come by later this summer.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

Spirit’s heart sank even further. “What? Really?”

“I know. I’m sorry. Things are just really crazy right now, and it’s just a lot. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Spirit tried not to let his dismay sink through. “Guess you’ll just have to call more then. And we’ll plan for Thanksgiving.”

“I’ll definitely try to be there for Thanksgiving,” Kami replied firmly. “And I’ll try to call more, too. My reception’s been spotty lately so I haven’t bothered, but it’s starting to get fixed.”

“Okay. Good.”

“How have things been?”

“Fine. I’m sure Maka told you everything already,” Spirit joked. “But I can reiterate if you want.”

“No, I’m okay. Thanks though.” He could hear the smile in her voice.

Despite that, Spirit swallowed. He had hoped she’d want to talk to him about what was going on too. Hear what was going on from him, and all that.

“How’s everything going with you?” He pressed, when she didn’t say anything else.

“Busy.” Kami sighed a little. “And Mama and Papa are on my ass about everything, which definitely doesn’t help. You know how they are.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Silence. Spirit waited for Kami to say something. He tried to rack his brain so that he could say something.

“I should probably go,” Kami said, finally.

“Okay.” Was that it? Was that really all they had to say to each other after not talking for months? “Don’t be a stranger, okay? We love you.”

“I know. I love you too. Tell Maka I’m sorry.”

“I will.”

Just before the call ended, Spirit glanced at the timestamp again.

38:18

Two minutes.

That was it.
And knowing Kami, or at least the pattern she’d been falling into lately, it would be at least another month until she called.

He let his phone drop onto the mattress, flopped onto his back, and since Maka wasn’t around to hear let himself sigh.

Maka was unusually silent as Spirit read her bedtime story later than night, much to his dismay. She seemed a bit distant too—she didn’t curl up next to him as he read, didn’t smile at the voices he did for the different characters.

“What’s the matter, Maka?” Spirit finally asked right after he had tucked her in.

For a minute, she didn’t respond.

“Maka?”

“Do you still love Mama?” she finally asked.

The question startled him. “Of course I love Mama. Papa loves you and Mama always, remember?”

At that same time though, he felt his stomach flutter with the same, nervous pangs from earlier as he spoke.

“Does Mama love you?”

“Of course she does.”

Why was he so nervous answering these questions? He shouldn’t be. It wasn’t as though he was lying.

“Why won’t she call more, then?”

“Well, your Mama’s a very-”

“-busy lady, I know,” Maka said impatiently. “But she was busy before. She still used to call all the time. She used to visit every year for fireworks too. Last year, when she couldn’t come then she said she’d come this year. But she didn’t.”

“Maka-”

“And you and her never talk much,” She went on. “I talk to her for a long time, but you only talk to her for a little while. You didn’t even tell her about Stein. You lied to her. I heard you. Why? How come you don’t want Mama to know about Stein?”

Fuck. He always forgot how perceptive Maka was sometimes. How closely she watched him and her mother, like a little hawk standing guard, ready to swoop in and prevent something from going wrong. Almost as if that was her job.

That realization made him feel uneasy.

“Papa?”

Spirit took a deep breath, trying to steel himself to get the worst topic of this conversation over with. “You know how Mama and Papa met in school, right?”
“Uh huh.” Maka’s eyes widened in realization. “And you knew Stein then too, right? Did Mama know him too?”

“She did.” There was an undeniable little twinge of bitterness at the memory. He and Kami had had other friends, but for a while there had been a distinct core group composed of him, her, and Stein. They always ate lunch together, walked to classes together, Stein would tag along on his and Kami’s dates just to irritate them, and so, so many other little things that had defined their relationship for years. Obviously, that had changed. “But when Papa and Stein had our... argument, Mama had an argument with Stein too. And they haven’t gotten along since.”

Unease flickered across Maka’s expression. “Would Mama have gotten mad that Stein was here?”

Spirit winced. “Probably.”

“Oh...” Maka looked grim as she processed that-- possibly remembering how severe her mother’s wrath could become. “Would she want him to leave?”

“Definitely.”

“Oh.” That seem to convince her.

Spirit waited for her to speak again. She didn’t, instead looking contemplative. Hoping that ship had sailed, he decided to move on to the next issue, one that was a bit easier to talk about.

“You know, you’re right in that Mama and I don’t talk much,” Spirit said carefully. “It’s just hard to, because she’s busy.”

“Will you tell her about Stein?” Maka asked.

Spirit winced. “Soon.” Preferably when he and Marie had already moved out, and it had been long enough that they could talk about it, without it being too big of a deal. “I will tell her. Just not now. It’s... not a good time. She’s under a lot of pressure right now, and I don’t want to stress her out.”

Which wasn’t a lie. Kami did say her parents were giving her a hard time.

“Is that all?” Maka relaxed a little.

“That’s all.” Spirit kissed her on the forehead. “Everything’s okay between us, angel. She just needs our support right now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good.” Spirit tucked the blankets around her shoulders. “Time for bed now.”

“Papa?”

“Yes?”

“I think you and Mama and Stein should all forgive each other.”

Spirit froze.

“Maybe not now, but someday,” Maka went on. “It’d be nice, don’t you think?”

“I think it’s bedtime, kiddo.” Spirit kissed her forehead before standing.
“You told me once that sometimes people do dumb stuff,” Maka continued, a bit more loudly. “And that sometimes they just need second chances.”


Maka stared up at him questioningly. “Papa?”

“Maybe, kiddo.” He managed, reaching over to switch off the lights. “Bedtime now, okay?”

Obviously, there was more she wanted to say. He could hear it in her pause, in the brief silence that seemed so loud, even though he couldn’t see her in the dark.

“Okay.” She sounded disappointed. “Good night, Papa.”

In the back of his mind, the scalpel glinted.

“Good night, Maka.”

He heard her stir in her blankets, and then go still.

As soon as Maka’s breathing had settled into a steady rhythm, Spirit pulled out his old, clunky laptop that had been given to him as a part of his scholarship and after a moment of staring at the empty search engine, slowly typed the name of court case that he hadn’t typed for a long, long time.

It wasn’t long before he found it. For the first time in years, he stared at a row of headlines on the screen.

“15-Year-Old Shibusen Academy Student Allegedly Drugged and Performed “Sickening” Experiments on Roommate”

“Shibusen Academy Student Deemed Fit to Stand Trial”

“Mini-Mad Scientist To Go To Mental Health Facility Instead of Prison”

The actual articles were vague. None of them mentioned his or Stein’s names. He remembered how both of Stein’s parents were surgeons, with enough money and influence to keep a their child’s name out of the headlines. And seemingly Spirit’s too-- maybe it was their form of an apology, other than the letter they sent Spirit saying as such that he never actually responded to.

Still, the anonymity didn’t change the fact that the whole thing had taken over his life. The press following had made it even worse. Despite his name never being mentioned, the whole thing had been written about, talked about on TV, broadcasted for the whole world to see with one simple google search. Maybe Spirit would have been more willing to talk about it, to tell people like Sid what had happened if every single little detail hadn’t been put into the spotlight. If he hadn’t watched everything spiral out of control until he felt like he had no say in it anymore.

None of them were new, though. The case hadn’t been written about in years.

That, at least, was good.

His hands were shaking. When he folded and clenched them together, it didn’t help.

Breathe in, breathe out.
Breathe in. Breathe out.

Maka’s voice echoed in his head. Forgive

Everything about the situation hurt, Stein’s presence alone hurt, even if he’d gone days with the man living under his roof without actually talking to him. But it was enough to affect his daughter. It was enough to slowly turn his life upside down, little by little, and it felt as though there was nothing he could do about it.

The headlines shone at him through the harsh light of his computer screen, written evidence of what had happened to him. (“When Scientific Curiosity Goes Wrong-” “Pleads Not Guilty By Reason of Insanity-” “Every Roommate’s Worst Nightmare-”)

(The glint of the scapel’s edge, tearing, pain pain pain-)

This was a bad idea.

Spirit closed the tab, shut his laptop, stored it behind his bed, and burrowed under the covers, desperately trying to regain control of his breathing.

Eventually, the Fourth of July rolled around. Despite Kami not coming to visit, just as she said, Spirit still put Maka’s favorite red bows in her hair, folded up their picnic blanket (which was really just the blanket Spirit slept with, but it worked), and brought out what they called their chicken bag. Every year before going to the fireworks, they’d get as much fried chicken as they could afford, cram it all into one bag, and haul it to the park where they could have a picnic and watch the extravagant fireworks show that was put on for the rich neighborhood nearby. From certain spots in the park, the fireworks were more than visible.

“Can we invite everyone?” Maka asked eagerly, watching Spirit fold up the blanket.

“Everyone?” Spirit questioned.

“Marie and Stein and Sid and Nygus and Azusa.” Maka gave him an exasperated look. “Who else, Papa?”

Spirit was hesitant. On one hand, he didn’t mind if Sid or Nygus came with them, but he definitely did mind if Marie or Stein did. Azusa he was hesitant towards too-- she had been extremely critical of the chicken bag earlier, which was a huge turn-off. “I don’t know kiddo, they’re probably busy.”

“Can I ask them?”

“I don’t know…”

Maka immediately pouted. Her eyes went wide and sad, her mouth turned downward, and hands wrung in front of her.

Spirit sighed. “Alright. Go ask them.”

The sad look vanished almost immediately, and she scampered out of their room excitedly.

Defeated again.

Less than ten seconds later, he already heard arguing.

“-but Stein it’ll be fun-"
“Not tonight Maka.”

“But they’re really pretty-”

There was a stain in the chicken bag anyway, so Spirit braced himself and headed out of his room and into the kitchen.

“-and they’re really, really cool-looking-” Maka immediately whirled on Spirit when he walked in. “Papa! Marie and Stein don’t want to come, but Sid does.”

“Yep, yep.” Sid was rummaging around in the sink, hand deep down the garbage disposal and looking frustrated. Marie was standing next to him, holding a flashlight pointed down in the sink, and Stein was leaning against the counter next to them, watching.

“What are you doing?” Spirit asked, watching Sid warily as he rummaged around in the sink. Sid’s hand seemed to be deep, deep down in the drain, which made him nervous. Thanks to a horror movie he’d watched when he was a kid, he had an irrational fear of the garbage disposal suddenly turning on with his hand still inside, along with watching the same thing happen to someone else.

“Oh, I dropped my pocket knife down the garbage disposal,” Sid muttered irritably. “But yeah, I’m not doing anything important tonight. Fireworks sound fun.”

“Did you just say you dropped your pocket knife down the garbage disposal?”

“Yes? I was rinsing it off in the sink, I dropped it, and it fell down the garbage disposal.”

“Oh.” That made sense. Spirit had been trying to figure out what Sid was doing with a knife in the sink.

“It’s not *that* weird,” Sid added defensively.

“It just seemed kind of random, that’s all.”

“What seemed kind of random?” That was Azusa, eyeing Sid and his arm down the disposal briefly before going over to the new fridge and opening it.

“Azusa, Papa and I are going to watch the fireworks, want to come?” Maka asked eagerly.

“Is that where you use the bag?” The refrigerator door closed.

“Bag?” Marie asked, who hadn’t been there when the chicken bag conversation had taken place.

“They fill that bag with fried chicken,” Azusa told her, opening the silverware drawer with a yogurt cup in hand.

Marie looked wistful for half a second. “Ooh.”

“Will you come?” Maka pressed.

“I don’t know…” Azusa looked hesitant. “It sounds like there’ll be a lot of bugs, probably mosquitoes during this time of year. And the grass is usually really prickly too in public parks, and there’s always the temperature-”

“Oh no,” Spirit mimicked in a high-pitched voice. “It sounds like *nature! The horror!*”

“Oh, bite me,” Azusa snapped.
“Oh, like you’re one to talk,” Sid interrupted, shooting Spirit an exasperated look. “Remember when you went backpacking with me?”

“When you made me go backpacking with you,” Spirit corrected, irritable at the subject being brought up.

“I do!” Maka chimed in. “I stayed with Blair for the weekend and we wanted to play dressup so we went down to the dollar store and she got me my witch hat. Remember Stein? I told you about that.”

“I do, actually,” Stein responded.

Spirit ignored that whole exchange, crossing his arms defensively instead. “What’s your point?”

“Are you kidding me?” Sid went on. “If it was up to you, we would have set up the tent in the park a block down. All you did was complain about your feet hurting. You spent most of the time moping in the tent and reading every single guidebook we brought. And even then you still got poison ivy, and we had to go home early. You are useless in the outdoors.”

“Oh no,” Azusa repeated with a falsetto and a smirk. “Not nature.”

“Well, at least I don’t complain about going to the park a block away!” Spirit shot back.

“Fine!” Azusa threw her hands in the air in defeat. “I’ll go if Marie goes.”

“Oh no,” Marie said quickly. Her eye slid to Spirit briefly, for half a second, before focusing away and distinctly not at him. “Go have fun! Stein wants to stay here, so... I’ll stay here too.”

“But you should come though,” Maka whined. “Please? Stein?”

“Maka, I have work to do,” Stein responded, much to Spirit’s relief. “I’d rather stay here.”

“Then can you come Marie?” Maka looked up at her hopefully.

“You should come,” Sid agreed.

“No no,” Marie insisted. “It’s okay. Honest.”

Spirit got the distinct suspicion that Marie did, in fact, want to go (she was staring longingly at the chicken bag anyway), but didn’t want to make things awkward by accepting his daughter’s invitation to go with them. Things were already awkward as it was.

But nevertheless, he still felt a small twinge of guilt. Because even though it probably would be incredibly awkward if she came, even more so in how the three of them had sort of been skirting around each other in the past few weeks, it didn’t feel fair to extend an invitation but make her feel pressured to not come. That sounded not just unfair, but also kind of a dick move.

A small part of him reminded him, all too-eagerly, that she was the one who brought Stein into his home. She was the reason he was there, just down the hall from not just Spirit, but his little girl too. He would have been perfectly content if he had never seen Stein again, but thanks to Hurricane Mjolnir, who had torn those hopes away with the announcement she was carrying Stein’s kid, this wouldn’t be the case.

But was it really her fault?

Spirit couldn’t say it was, despite his initial anger at her for essentially being the one to bring Stein
back into his life. Maybe it was because their situation hit way, way too close to home, and caused him to remember uncertain, plain terrifying memories that he knew had shaped him forever.

*She honestly couldn’t have picked a better sap to let them both stay.*

The thought made him feel bitter, and maybe a bit sad too. He wasn’t entirely sure why. But he’d tasted that desperation, that willingness to do whatever it took, had lived through it. So could he really blame her for that.

No. He couldn’t. She deserved better, she really did. Better than Stein, better than a shitty situation, better than the stress that came from becoming a parent too young.

Which was why...

“**You should come,**” Spirit said, quietly.

“What?”

“**You should come,**” Spirit said, a bit louder.

“**Really?**” Marie was visibly shocked. She nearly dropped the flashlight, causing Sid to yelp as it almost clattered into the sink.

“**Careful!!**”

“**Sorry!**” Marie glanced over at Spirit, hesitantly. Questioningly. “Are- are you sure?”

“Sure.”

“**Yeah, come!**” Maka begged. “**Please?**”

“**Well...**” Her eye was still on Spirit as if she was waiting him to protest, retract his statement, whatever.

Spirit shoved his now-sweaty palms in his pants pocket, and kept his mouth shut.

“Alright.” Marie kept watching Spirit, as if waiting for a reaction.

He gave her none.

And for a minute, it was all worth it as Maka let out a happy whoop. “**Yay!**”

“I got it!” Sid yelled, raising his free fist in the air triumphantly.

A loud, angry grating noise came from the sink, causing Spirit to jump. Sid’s expression shifted from victorious to confused to borderline horrified as he pulled out a toothbrush-shaped piece of metal covered in the most disgusting, worst-smelling gunk Spirit had ever seen.

“What *is* that?” Spirit gasped.

“I don’t know.” Sid glanced back down at it again, somewhat helplessly. “Anybody know?”

“It’s definitely not a pocketknife,” Azusa pointed out.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“It could be used as one though.” Stein squinted. “It looks like it has a sharp edge.”
“You didn’t break the garbage disposal did you?” Azusa demanded.

“I don’t think so…”

“Nothing’s leaking,” Spirit remarked, glancing over Sid’s shoulder.

Only to realize that a small puddle of water was rapidly appearing on the floor.

“Oh wait… crap!” He lunged at a nearby dish towel and plopped it down over the puddle before it could grow bigger. “Sid, what did you do?!?”

“I don’t know!” Sid replied frantically.

“Calm down, it’s a small leak.” Stein kneeled forward, opened the small cabinet under the sink to peer through. “I’m sure it’s not that- oh.” He pressed his lips together. “That is a problem.”

“What’s wrong?” Spirit asked, slowly teetering on the verge of panicking. What would happen if they had to pay for a plumber?

“There is a leak. A pretty significant leak. But we could probably patch it up with duct-tape for now.”

“Should I call the plumber?” Azusa asked ruefully.

Stein pushed his glasses up on his nose. “I could probably fix it.”

“Really?”

“Probably. From what I can tell right now, it’s only the pipe.”

“The garbage disposal might be broken though,” Marie pointed out.

“True.”

“Maybe we should turn it on and see,” Spirit suggested, leaning over to reach for the switch.

“Wait Spirit-!” Azusa yelped.

“Spirit no-” Stein began.

Spirit realized that might be a bad idea a millisecond too late, just as it whirred to life.

Or more accurately, as it exploded to life, sending a spray of water and gross gunk up like a fountain from the drain, and, judging by Stein’s spluttering from the sink, down from the pipes. Their shrieks were in unison (Spirit’s being admittedly a bit louder than the rest because of the spray of gross sink water that absolutely splattered across his face). Spirit reeled back from the sink spluttering and frantically wiping his face while desperately flicking off the switch, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Stein pulling back from the sink, snatching a towel, and covering his face with it.

The gunk and gross shit had gotten everywhere. Spirit could do nothing but stare at it with utter dismay and a silent ‘fuckkk…’.

“Why would you do that?!” Sid finally shrieked.

“I don’t know! Eugh…” Spirit cringed as he wiped at his face again, ugh, he could feel the grime
in his bangs and his eyebrows.

“What the hell—oh my god.” Nygus stood in the kitchen doorway, mouth agape. “What happened?!!”

“Spirit just blew up the garbage disposal,” Azusa snapped.

“Hey, Sid’s the one who broke it!” Spirit protested.

“I’m not the one who decided it would be an absolute brilliant idea to turn it on while it was broken!” Sid snapped.

“You literally ripped a weird piece of metal out of the pipes! This is your fault!”

“I just cleaned the kitchen,” Azusa growled. “I just cleaned the kitchen. I am not cleaning it again.”

“Oh no way, Spirit’s cleaning it.”

“Hey-!”

“I only left for five minutes,” Nygus muttered under her breath. “Five minutes…”

Despite the mess Stein still insisted he could fix the pipes, so as soon as the mess was cleaned up (Spirit had been forced to clean it by himself, much to his chagrin), he was left to it while the rest of them piled in Nygus’ minivan again to go to the nearest fried chicken place, and then the park.

They had gotten a late start in actually getting to the park, thanks to the stupid sink. Since it was so crowded, Nygus had been forced to park her car nearly two blocks away, which meant they had to hoof it with two lawn chairs that Sid had borrowed from their neighbors, several pillows, eight blankets that Nygus had insisted on bringing even though the evenings were warm, and what was probably ten pounds of fried chicken. Spirit was just praying that the usual hill they usually took every year hadn’t been taken in their delay, since that was the spot that gave the best view of the fireworks in the entire park.

“I think we got too much fried chicken,” Azusa said, watching as Spirit slung the now overfilled chicken bag over his shoulder.

“There’s no such thing,” Marie argued as she adjusted her wide-brimmed sunhat in one of the car’s rear mirrors.

“You’re all going to die of heart disease.”

“You’re just jealous because you’re stuck with that lame salad.” Spirit tossed his blanket over his shoulder as he shut the car door.

“I’m the one who bought it, moron, how can I be stuck with it?”

“Well, if you want some chicken we’ll probably have some left over,” Sid said dismissively, eyeing the now-stuffed chicken bag Spirit was carrying. “Probably plenty left over.”

“Oomph!”

Maka’s grunt caught Spirit’s attention. She was on her tiptoes, pulling a large duffel bag down from the trunk by the straps before carefully setting it down on the ground with a grunt.
Which was weird. He didn’t remember her putting that in there.

“What’cha you got there kiddo?”

Maka froze, eyes darting up at him frantically.

“Uh,” She said after a brief pause. “Blankets.”

“Blankets?”

“And- books.”

Spirit felt his brows furrow. “Books?”

“Yes,” Maka said defensively.

“Why’d you bring books?”

“Just in case.” Maka crossed her arms. “You never know.”

“Okay.” Spirit wasn’t particularly convinced, but at the same he wasn’t too concerned. Maybe there was a toy in there that Maka wanted to bring, but was embarrassed about it enough that she wanted to carry it around in a way no one would see it. He wasn’t going to question it. “Do you need help?”

“I got it.” Maka bent down, pulled the strap of her bag over her shoulder, and stood up with another grunt. She stumbled a bit then straightened with what looked like a surge of determination, which was adorable, and then glanced up at Spirit pointedly.

Spirit grinned. “I see that.”

Maka puffed up with pride, and began trudging in the direction of the park.

“So where are we headed?” Nygus closed the passenger’s side door, arms full of blankets.

“To the park and up the hill.” Spirit pointed.

“We have to walk all the way over there?” Azusa asked in dismay.

“It’s not as far as it looks,” He replied.

“Otherwise you probably wouldn’t walk that far,” Sid added.

Spirit glowered at him.

“Oh what? It’s true.”

Spirit turned and began walking away without a word.

“Oh, you’re still mad at me because you had to clean up all the gunk from the garbage disposal, aren’t you?”

Spirit whipped back around again. “I’m mad because that was your fault in the first place and you wouldn’t even help me clean it up!”

“Okay, for the final time you’re the one who turned it on, and I didn’t even get my knife back, so I don’t know what you’re complaining about-”
“For the sake of not having to hear this argument all over again, I’m going to cut you off there,” Nygus said. The car let out a beep as the doors locked, and she slid the keys into her bag. “Do the fireworks happen here every year?”

“Not here,” Spirit responded, shooting one last glare at Sid, who just made a face at him in response as they all started trudging back after Maka, Marie and Azusa. “They’re for the fairgrounds next to the park. They put on this huge show every year, but it’s cheaper just to watch it from here.”

“What?” Azusa glanced over her shoulder in dismay. “If it’s for the fairgrounds, there’s no way we’ll be able to watch it from here.”

“You’d be surprised.”

Spirit’s hopes of getting their usual spot on the hill was immediately dashed several feet away as soon as he saw that a family had already set up their picnic, backs towards them in folding chairs that were set up in a half-circle.

“No!” He wailed, dropping to his knees in dismay. “We lost our spot!”

“No!” Maka cried out.

“That’s fine,” Nygus said, her voice sounding directly above him. “We’ll just go somewhere else.”

“You don’t understand! That’s the best spot.” Spirit gestured towards the direction of the hill in emphasis.

“It’s not a big deal, there’s got to be another hill-”

“Hey!” Spirit jumped at Maka’s shout, when he glanced towards her he saw she was cupping her hands around her mouth, and her eyes were narrowed in the direction of the family. “Hey, you!”

“Maka-” Azusa hissed in alarm, but was ignored.

“You can’t sit there!” Maka went on. “There’s a hill of fire ants up there! They’ll bite you if you sit there for too long!”

“Maka!” Spirit quickly clamped a hand over her mouth. Much to his horror, the family were actually starting to glance over their chairs. “Maka, what are you doing?”

“Getting our spot back,” Maka replied, as if that were the most obvious thing in the world.

“What? Maka, you can’t-” Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye that was facing the family, a part of his brain lit up in recognition.

Dark hair. Sharp features. Wait…

When he glanced up, the recognition hit almost immediately. There were a total of four faces looking curiously down from that hill, and at least one of them he definitely recognized.

“Spirit? Is that you?” Sure enough, it was none other than the guy whose shoes he puked on—Shinigami, Spirit remembered. Everything about him was exactly, almost weirdly the same—same salt and pepper hair, gold eyes, weird skull rings, dark clothing, possible eyeliner. There wasn’t even any trace of summer clothes appropriate for the hot weather—it was the same black suit and strange billowy trench coat he’d been wearing the time they’d met. Even the folding chair he
was sitting in looked weirdly ornate, black and silver with curved armrests.

His first thought- **wow, small world.**

His second thought- **who the actual fuck wears a trench coat at a picnic in ninety-degree heat?**

“Hi Mr. Albarn.” Sure enough, Kid’s head peeked over the back of the second, smaller chair on Shinigami’s side as he waved. His embroidered chair, Spirit suddenly noticed. His name was embroidered in fancy lettering on the back, and while it wasn't as fancy as his father’s, it sure as hell could be picked out from a crowd.

"Hi," Spirit said.

“Fire ants!!” came a shriek.

Next to Kid, there were two more chairs occupied by two little blonde girls that Spirit vaguely remembered from the picture Shinigami had shown him in their first encounter-- one chair was purple, one was pink, and had the names “Liz” and “Patty” embroidered on them respectively. The little girl Spirit assumed was Liz looked positively freaked out, while the other was watching them curiously.

“Yeah,” Maka called. “They’ll bite you if you don’t move!”

“Maka, stop it,” Spirit hissed, wincing as Liz let out a panicked shriek. “There’s no fire ants! She’s kidding!”

“Mr. Morton?” Azusa’s voice broke in. When Spirit glanced up at her, she was staring at Shinigami with surprise written all over her face. It took a second for her words to sink in.

**Wait. Mr. Morton?**

“And Uryu Yumi’s girl!” Suddenly Shinigami was beaming, getting to his feet and descending down from the hill, trench coat billowing behind him in a cascade of almost ethereal-looking black fabric. “Hello hello!”

“They’ll crawl down your pants and bite you!” Maka was going on. “They’ll bite you and bite you until there’s sores all over your legs that’ll leak all sorts of pus!”

“Maka!” Spirit pleaded. “Stop.”

“What is happening?” He heard Sid mutter.

“Excuse me,” Marie cut in. “Not to be rude or anything, but who are you?”

“Nice coat,” Nygus remarked, eyeing Shinigami’s coat approvingly.

“Thank you!” Shinigami stuck a hand out to Marie, who hesitantly went ahead and shook it. “Shinigami Morton, pleasure to meet you.”

“Whoa, wait.” All Spirit was hearing was that last name-- Morton. As in, *Morton Industries*, the same company that he’d helped him get an internship for? Or was he a different Morton? He had to be a different Morton. No way that the head of Morton Industries, one of the most high-brand companies in the world, was a weirdly perky middle-aged man who looked like he came straight out of an obscure goth rock band cover. “Morton?”

“Ah.” Shinigami gave a small, sheepish grin. “I uh- don't usually like giving my name out.
Besides, I figured you'd be surprised if you somehow- er, if you actually did get the internship. Congratulations on getting it by the way! I look forward to working with you."

“Okay,” Spirit managed. This was getting to be too much. “So you’re the Morton?”

“I do own the company, yes.”

Oh my god.

“Should I apologize for puking on you again?” Spirit asked weakly.

Shinigami actually chuckled. “No need. You did clean them up good as new.”

That was... relieving, to say the least. “Alright. Cool. Nice to see you again.”

“I’m still lost,” Nygus cut in. “How do you know each other?”

“Oh. Uh.” Spirit slung the chicken bag up his shoulder and got to his feet. “Shinigami’s the guy who helped me on the internship.”

Understanding clicked in her eyes. “Oh yeah! Uh... hi. Seriously, nice coat. Goddamn.”

Shinigami looked pleased. “Thank you.”

“Did you say you puked on him?” Sid asked, looking way too interested for Spirit’s liking.

“No,” Spirit said quickly.

“Pretty sure you did. You didn't mention that-”

“How do you know him Azusa?” Marie asked curiously, and Spirit could have kissed her for cutting him off.

“Family acquaintance,” Azusa replied. “He was coworkers with my father.”

“Really?” Spirit asked, surprised.

“For years,” Shinigami agreed. “How is he? Has he irritated anyone lately?”

Azusa sighed. “The most recent I can think of is Arachne Gorgon. Although in his defense, her handling of the pastry situation at the last company gala was pretty tasteless. Did you hear about that?”

Shinigami scowled. “Hear about it? I was there. I imagine he had a field day with that.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Can we move away from the ants now?” Liz pleaded again.

“There’s no ants,” Spirit said quickly.

“But she said-” Liz whimpered, pointing at Maka.

“She was joking,” Spirit assured her.

“Papa,” Maka whined. “We could have gotten our spot.”
“That’s not how we get our spot, okay?” Spirit lowered his voice. “We don’t say that there’s fire ants when there isn’t any. Okay?”

“Stein would’ve done it,” Maka countered.

Spirit had never, ever heard a phrase that made him want to pull out his hair more. “Maka. Angel. Sweetie. We don’t base our decisions on what Stein would or wouldn’t have done, okay?”

“Definitely not,” He thought he heard Marie mutter.

“But that’s our spot!” Maka said stubbornly, pointing up at the hill.

“We could move over if you want,” Shinigami offered.

“Oh no, it’s okay!” Spirit said quickly.

“You sure? We don’t mind.”

“Are you sure there’s no ants?” Liz chimed in again.

“There’s no ants,” Kid reassured her.

“But if they sit next to us, they’ll probably go after them instead of us!” Patty added.

Liz immediately brightened, before yelling down at them. “You should sit next to us!”

Spirit snorted. Well, I guess we kind of deserved that.

“We don’t want to bother you-”

“No bother at all. Besides, Azusa, I’d like to know what your father said to Arachne.”

“What do you guys think?” Spirit glanced over at Marie, Nygus and Sid.

“Sure,” Marie said brightly, flashing her Marie-esque sunny smile as Nygus and Sid simply shrugged. “Thank you, Mr. Morton.”

“No problem! It’s always nice to have the company. And call me Shinigami, I’m not that old.”

“Yeah, you are,” Liz called.

With that decided, they lugged their chairs, blankets, and chicken up the hill while Shinigami and his kids began to move their stuff over to make room. Despite having more chairs, blankets, food than they did (although the blankets part was debatable, considering that Nygus seemed to have brought almost every blanket in the apartment), they still managed to rearrange their stuff in the exact same formation as it was before, just several feet to the left.

“Nygus, there needs to be a blanket to sit on,” Azusa pointed out.

“What’s wrong with sitting on the grass?” Between the two chairs, Nygus had set up what was essentially a fort before wrapping herself up in a thick, snakelike layer of blankets.

“The grass is itchy,” Spirit said pointedly. “Just one blanket.”

“Fine,” Nygus grumbled, unwrapping a single blanket from her cocoon and tossing it to Spirit.

“You take one of the chairs, Marie,” Sid said, gesturing.

“Oh no, it’s fine,” Marie said quickly.
“C’mon. You need to milk this kind of thing for as long as you can.”

Marie huffed out a small laugh. “I’ll have months to do that.”

“Months starting now.” Sid gestured again. “Take a seat.”

“Alright, fine,” Marie relented, before stepping forward to sink down onto the offered chair. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

It wasn’t long after they’d finally all sat down, Azusa taking the free seat and Sid settling down next to Spirit and Maka, that Spirit felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to face a scowling Kid.

“Am I asymmetrical?” Spirit guessed.

“Incredibly. Your updo is at least a millimeter off center.”

“It is?” Spirit patted the back of his head, where he’d pulled his hair off his neck due to the heat, which felt stickier and stickier the longer they were outside. How Nygus was surviving in those blankets he had no idea.

“That’s pretty specific,” Marie remarked, her eyebrows raised.

“Yes.” Kid narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re alright, I suppose.”

“Well, thank you.”

“Her pigtails are crooked too.” Kid pointed at Maka.

“Huh?” Maka froze with a mouth full of chicken.

“Can I fix you?” Kid asked.

“Uh.” Maka swallowed down her mouthful. “Sure?”

Spirit scowled. “Don’t get too comfortable next to my little girl though.”

“Spirit, they’re like five,” Sid pointed out.

“I don’t care! You think I want any boys near my Maka? I don’t think so!”

“Papa,” Maka grumbled, as Kid eagerly crawled over to her and took each of her pigtails in one hand.

About an hour later was when the bug spray came out.

“There are bugs!” Azusa hissed, spraying around at the ground irritably.

The fumes from the sheer excess of bug spray she was using felt as though they were forming clouds, and everyone around her immediately started coughing.

“Azusa please,” Nygus managed, pulling her shirt up over her nose.

“They’re everywhere, are you kidding me-?”
“BUGS!” The shriek caused Spirit to jump. Patty darted around them in circles, jumping up and down in what looked like an attempt to squash the bugs. Her fluffy, frilly skirt swished around her, definitely looking as though it wasn’t made for outdoor wear. “They’re all coming to you instead of us!”

Awesome.

“Finished,” Kid announced from behind him, stepping down and plopping down next to Maka, who nodded approvingly.

“It’ll look better if you braid it!” And now Liz had planted herself next to him, smoothing her dress down neatly as she sat.

“No!” Kid snapped. “You’ll ruin it!”

Liz scowled, but she didn’t protest, instead glancing over at Marie. “Can I braid your hair?”

“Of course,” Marie said warmly.

She grinned, bounding over and around to Marie’s chair. “I like your hair. It’s really pretty.”

Marie smiled. “Thank you!”

“You’ll ruin it,” Kid told her irritably.

“No I won’t.” Liz stuck her tongue out at him.

“Oh god, I think I got bit!” Azusa yelped, before unleashing another round of bug spray.

At this rate, Spirit wouldn’t be surprised if they choked to death.

As the sun slowly began to dip down beneath the horizon, Spirit noticed Shinigami moving over to their side of the hill.

“Mind if I join you?” He asked. “I’m all alone over there.”

He gestured to Kid, who was talking excitedly with a giggling Maka, at Liz, who had moved onto braiding Nygus’ hair, and Patty, who was playing what looked like an energetic game of rock-paper-scissors with Marie.

Spirit shrugged. “Go right ahead.”

“Thanks.” Shinigami settled next to Spirit on the blanket semi-awkwardly as he reclined, then sat up and crossed his legs, then uncrossed them. “All right then.” His eyes flickered over to the drumstick in Spirit’s hand. “You brought fried chicken?”

“Hell yeah we did. Want some?”

“I would.” Shinigami looked like he was grudgingly admitting this.

“Marie, pass Mr. Morton here a leg!” Spirit called out over the symphony of surrounding voices.

“Here!” Marie, who had the chicken bag perched in her lap, reached out over Maka and Kid’s heads to pass a piece to an awaiting Shinigami.
“Thank you!” Shinigami turned drumstick over his hands for a second before biting into it. “Mm. I haven’t had Chick-fil-A in a long time.”

Spirit snorted. “It’s from KFC, actually.”

“Same thing.” Shinigami waved a dismissive hand. “So, do you come here every year?”

“Since Maka was a baby, yeah. Do you?”

“Usually we go over to the stadium. But the tickets sold out earlier this year, and we didn’t manage to get any. A coworker told me that the park was another option for the fireworks, so we headed on over here.”

“Nice.”

“What’s this?” Patty suddenly asked loudly.

“Nothing!” Spirit glanced over to see Maka protectively shielding her duffel bag from Patty. “Don’t touch it.”

Patty stared at Maka, then the bag, before stepping forward and kicking it.

“Hey!” Maka let out an angry screech. “I said don’t touch it!”

“It’s alive,” Patty pointed out.

“Patty, leave it alone,” Shinigami scolded.

Patty pouted, and sank down back onto the blanket.

Then there was another long hiss of an aerosol can, and it didn’t take long for the fumes to hit Spirit’s nose.

“Azusa, come on,” Sid groaned.

“They’re biting me!” was the shrill, angry response. “Why are they only coming after me?!”

Soon enough, the moon had started to rise and the park was completely dark. It was taking a longer time than last year for the fireworks to start however, to the point where Spirit started to wonder if maybe they had been cancelled this year and no one had been told about it.

“Does it always take this long?” Azusa asked.

“Not usually. I dunno, maybe there’s a delay.”

“Bored,” He heard Patty’s muffled mumble before Kid shushed her.

Then, a streak of light shot up towards the sky and burst into an explosion of color.

*BOOM!*

“Woohoo!” Perched next to her duffel bag, Maka threw her hands up towards the sky.

“It’s loud!” Patty shrieked excitedly.

*BOOM! BOOM!*
Bursts of color exploded into the sky, one after the other, as loud as a gunshot.

“Finally,” Spirit heard Azusa mutter to Marie.

“Shh!” Marie hissed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Spirit heard Liz let out a frightened whimper, curling up and burying her face into Shinigami’s side. The man stroked her hair soothingly, but just like the rest of them his eyes were focused on the night sky. Nygus was still wrapped up in her blankets, chin propped up in her hands as she watched the sky. For once, everyone looked content.

Spirit reclined back a bit, satisfied. He felt more at ease than he had in weeks. It felt nice, being surrounded by people, even if he had only met some of them a few weeks ago. He and Maka were usually at these kind of things alone, and he couldn’t even remember the last time he was hanging out with this many people that he knew.

It felt nice.

BOOM! BOOM!

“BOOM!” In the middle of folding up the picnic blanket, Spirit watched as Patty screamed right in Liz’s face.

“Knock it off!” Liz squealed, trying to bat her sister away.

“Patty, stop that,” Shinigami said, almost absent-mindedly as he carefully arranged the leftover food back into the ice box.

Patty did stop, sinking down to the ground sulking. But another waft of the now-familiar smell of bug spray almost immediately caused her to cover her nose with her hands, along with everyone else.

“Azusa, you’re going to kill us at this rate,” Marie managed, pulling her t-shirt up over her nose.

Azusa ignored her, continuing to spray around in their general area. “It’s fine.”

“We’re leaving, you know that right?” Spirit asked.

“It’s not my fault they won’t go away!” Azusa snapped.

“I guess they keep bugging you, then,” Shinigami said casually.

“Good one!” Spirit gave him an approving nod.

Azusa visibly cringed, but at least she stopped spraying and slid the can back in her pack. “Fine, I’ll stop. Can we get out of here then? Before my legs are completely covered in mosquito bites?”

“I think we will, at least.” Shinigami glanced down at Liz, Patty, and Kid, who were each pulling their little fancy lawn chairs on their backs. “Are we good to go, kids?”

“We’re good, father,” Kid responded, heaving his chair onto his back.

“Nice job. Well-” Shinigami turned back to face Spirit and everyone else, flashing a peace sign. “It was nice meeting all of you! And thanks for the fried chicken.”
“No problem,” Sid said.

“No problem at all!” Marie agreed.

“It was nice to meet you.” Nygus added.

“And tell your father I said hello, Azusa,” Shinigami added.

“I will, sir.” Azusa gave him a nod. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate it.”

“And Spirit! I’ll see you in a couple weeks!”

Spirit grinned. “Looking forward to it.”

“Me too! I’ll-” Shinigami suddenly froze, eyes suddenly fixated over Spirit’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Spirit turned, to see that he was staring at Maka, who was frozen leaning over her bag.


“No,” Maka said quickly.

“I thought I saw it move.”

“What?” Spirit stared incredulously at the duffel bag. It was completely still.

“It didn’t,” Maka insisted. “That’d be weird.”

Then Spirit saw it. It was slight, small, and he almost missed it completely.

But there was no denying it. The bag moved, shifted just a little, indicating that there was something inside it.

“Oh my god!” Azusa must have seen it too.

“It’s aliiiiiiive!” Patty sang gleefully, pointing.

“Wait, what?” Sid demanded.

“No, it’s not,” Maka said, somewhat desperately.

“Maka,” Spirit said slowly. “What’s in the bag?”

“Nothing!”

“Maka.”

Maka shifted uncomfortably under everyone’s stares. “Really. It’s nothing.”

“Open the bag.”

“But-”

“Now, Maka.”

Maka looked hesitant, but his tone seemed to be enough to make her listen. Slowly, she unzipped
the bag, causing an actual whimper from the inside.

“It’s okay,” Maka whispered soothingly.

Spirit’s first assumption then was that it was a cat or a dog in Maka’s bag, or at least some sort of animal.

Nope.

Dead wrong.

A small, bright-colored head of hair popped out from Maka’s bag, and big, dark eyes stared at them warily.

Utter silence.

Spirit’s instant thought was that the kid looked like a tiny Eeyore-stringy, messy hair that hung in their face, a hunched, droopy stature, and big sad eyes.

“Oh my god.” That was Marie.

“What the...” Azusa.

Spirit stared, absolutely speechless and fully aware that he was gaping. It wasn’t just the fact that Maka had somehow snuck in a child in her duffel bag-it was that the poor boy (girl? He couldn’t actually tell) did not look good at all. They had dark circles under their eyes, and almost immediately let out a whimper and shrunk back behind Maka at their stares. Their overall appearance immediately raised Spirit’s hackles-- the dark circles, the shirt, the hollowed cheekbones, the far, far too thin look of their arms, fingers, and shoulders.

“Oh dear.” That was Shinigami, voice low and concerned. Spirit wasn’t the only one who noticed it then-Nygus, Sid, and Azusa all looked aghast, and Marie borderline horrified at the kid’s appearance.

“Maka.” Spirit’s voice came out low. “Who is this?”

“Don’t get mad!” Maka burst out. “It’s not his fault!”

The kid was starting to tremble, much to Spirit’s mild horror.

“I’m not,” He said quickly, mostly to pacify the boy (boy? Maka had referred to him as a ‘he’). “I’m not mad, Maka, I just-- who is this?”

“This is Crona.” Maka hugged the kid tightly, somewhat desperately. He practically curled into her arms, burying his face in her shoulder and turning his back towards Spirit and the others. “He really wanted to see the fireworks, Papa.”

**Crona.**

Holy shit.

“Your- your friend Crona?” Spirit’s stomach sank down to the ground as he stared dumbfounded at the kid who was supposed to be an imaginary friend.

“Oh-huh.” Maka gave him a pleading look. “Please don’t be mad Papa-”
“Was he in your bag this whole time?” Sid sounded horrified.

Spirit’s mind was flashing back to all the times she’d said she was playing with Crona—meeting up in the alleyways, sneaking out of the fire escape to see him. Every time he’d come into her room while she was talking to them, only to no one else there when he entered and Maka would jump as if she was hiding something.

Was he hiding in our room this entire time and I didn’t know? Spirit thought with mild horror. How the hell had he missed that? How often had he missed that?

“Sweetie?” Marie asked gently, slipping out of the lawn chair and on the blanket next to Spirit, Maka and Crona, stretching out a hand towards the latter. “Sweetie, it’s okay. We’re not angry.”

Crona immediately recoiled from her touch. Marie faltered a bit, and Spirit’s stomach sank even further.

Christ, how long has this been going on? How the hell could I have not noticed—?

“Hey,” Spirit tried, gently. “Crona. Don’t be upset, okay? We’re- we’re happy you’re here.”

Crona tentatively peeked out from Maka’s shoulder, sniffing loudly, but giving no response.

“Maka’s told us a lot about you,” Spirit went on, desperately grasping at anything that would make the kid relax, so that they could talk and figure out what the hell was going on. “So we’re happy to finally meet you.”

Crona just stared at him, still-shaking and doe-eyed.

“Want some fried chicken?” Shinigami held up a wrapped piece of said food.

Spirit gave him an incredulous look, only barely just managing not to snap at him, but Shinigami ignored him.

“It’s only one, we ate the rest, but it’s still pretty good! If we had known you were here we would have saved you more. It’s pretty good. You can dip it in ranch or ketchup if you want.”

Something about that seemed to pique Crona’s interest, or at least, made them a bit less wary. They actually looked up at Shinigami curiously, and even inched forward a bit.

“You can have it.” Shinigami went ahead and set the piece of chicken right in front of them on the ground. “We won’t make you take it, but if you want it, you can have it.”

Crona looked like he was going to go for it. It looked like he wanted to, at least.

“It won’t bite,” Shinigami reassured.

Slowly, Crona disentangled himself from Maka enough to snatch the chicken quickly, as though he was scared Shinigami was just going to snatch it back.

Spirit felt a cold fist wrap around his heart when he realized that maybe he was.

“Alright.” Shinigami brought his voice down low to talk to Spirit. “I’m going to call child services.”

“Good idea,” Spirit muttered back.
Crona was watching them warily, Spirit noticed, enough that Maka reached over to place a comforting hand on their shoulder.

It turned out to be a long night, filled with questioning and Maka reluctantly revealing some horrible information that left a sick feeling in the bottom of Spirit’s stomach and had him holding Maka close on the car ride home.

Spirit wasn’t naive. He knew some parents shouldn’t be parents and are anyways, and their children suffer as a result. He just couldn’t stomach it. The idea of a parent treating their child like garbage had always created enormous feelings of disgust in him, but when Maka was born, well...

All in all it had ended well- Crona was now safe and sound with the authorities, hopefully as far away as possible from the enormous bitch his mother apparently was. Shinigami, who was pretty much the one handling the situation at this point, had promised to give Spirit updates on the situation before he’d left with Maka and their roommates to head home in silence.

Once he’d sort of gotten over the shock of everything that had just happened, Spirit realized he had to give Maka a talk about it. Which meant he had to go into stern parent mode, preferably as soon as possible.

“We need to talk about Crona once we get inside, kiddo,” Spirit told her softly as they climbed up the stairs to their apartment.

“Why?” Maka’s eyes went wide. “I thought you said he’d be okay!”

“He will be,” Spirit said quickly, reassuringly. “He will be, don’t worry.”

“Then what are we talking about?” Maka asked.

Spirit took a deep breath, stopping just as they reached their floor. In front of them, his roommates glanced at him, but he motioned for them to go on ahead. “Maka, how long did you know that Crona’s mother hurt him?”

“A while,” Maka admitted, visibly drooping at the subject. “But Crona made me promise not to tell anyone.”

Spirit let out a slow, exhale. “Maka, if another kid comes to you and tells you they’re being hurt at home, you always have to tell someone. Whether it’s me or anyone else.”

“But...I didn’t want Crona to get mad at me.”
“It doesn’t matter if Crona gets mad at you, kiddo. It’s the right thing to do.”

“And I didn’t want him to get in trouble. What if I told and no one believed me? Crona said last time people in uniforms came, they didn’t find anything wrong and his mother just got mad at him.”

Spirit bit his lip. “That is a possibility of what could have happened. But your first priority should always be to try to get people who are in those situations out of them.”

Maka’s lip quivered. “Did I do a bad thing then?”

“No-no no no.” Spirit stepped forward enough to pull her into a one-armed hug. “You didn’t do anything wrong. And it all worked out, didn’t it? Crona’s going to get away from his mom and go somewhere where he’ll be happier.”

“Okay.” Maka sniffed, and abruptly wiped her eyes.

“You did fine, Maka,” Azusa added. “Just remember what Marie said.”

Nyagus made a sound of agreement, and Sid reached over to pat her shoulder. Maka smiled a bit at the action.

“So Crona will be okay?” She asked.

“Definitely,” Spirit told her firmly.

“When will we see each other again?”

“I don’t know,” Spirit had to admit. “I’ll keep in touch with Shinigami, okay?”

“Okay.” Her smiled wavered a bit, but she looked like she was accepting of the answer.

“Okay.” Spirit stood up and turned towards the door again, keys jingling in his hand. “Now let’s get inside-”

He opened the door, and stopped in his tracks.

“Hey.” Stein was sitting cross-legged on the ground in the entryway, a welding mask perched on his head, what looked like the TV remote in his hands, tools, wires, and pieces of pipe scattered around him.

From where he could see inside the kitchen, there was a gaping hole where the sink used to be.

“What did you do?” Spirit shrieked.

“So, it turns out the sink as a whole wasn’t particularly in good shape. So...”

“Did you take the whole thing apart?” Marie was gaping.

“I did. I figured it could be used for something else.”

“Like what?” Azusa snapped.

A nearby scuttling noise made Spirit jump. What looked like a small tarantula scuttled out from the kitchen-- and for a minute, Spirit actually thought it was a tarantula before he realized that tarantulas weren’t made out of old pipes, and weren’t robots.
“Holy shit,” Sid gasped.

“Language,” Maka muttered.

The little robot squatted, then crawled forward and perched itself next to Stein with a series of little robotic clicks. Stein gave it an absent-minded pat.

“Did you just make that?” Azusa’s eyes were like saucers.

“Yes. Why?”

“Out of the pipes.”

“Yes.”

“WHY?!” Azusa’s voice rose abruptly, causing them all to jump.

“Well, as I said, the sink is pretty much unfixable, so I thought I might as well use it for spare parts.”

“Didn’t you say you could just duct-tape it?” Sid demanded.

“Tried that. It didn’t work.”

“So you decided the best course of action would be to completely dismantle it.”

“Yes?”

“What about my knife, at least?” Sid asked. “Did you get it out?”

“No.”

“No?”

Stein shrugged. “I didn’t find it.”

“You didn’t?!” Sid stared at him. “How?!”

“The sink—” Azusa said through gritted teeth. “—that we needed. That we could have gotten fixed. Instead of having to buy an entirely new sink! Which is more expensive!”

“I didn’t think that be a problem for you,” Stein remarked.

“I can’t continuously buy major household necessities!” Azusa looked as though she wanted to pull her hair out. “I only have a certain amount left, and a lot of it I want to save for bills!”

“We could have at least used the sink as a starting point Franken,” Marie sighed. “It probably would have been cheaper to replace the parts that were broken instead of buying an entirely new sink.”

There was a silence, allowing that to sink in.

Stein cleared his throat before glancing down at his robot-tarantula, which Spirit could have sworn gave a sad little whirr. “I didn’t think this through.”

“No shit,” Azusa snapped.
“Hey, Spirit?”

Spirit could hardly hear Sid over the symphony of more than a dozen different voices, the clanging of dishes and silverware, and the general buzz of a very crowded restaurant on Friday night. But when he turned his head there he was, positioned at the end of the counter semi-awkwardly.

“Yeah?” Spirit raised an eyebrow at him as he finished refilling a glass of wine and sliding it over to a waiting customer down at the end of the bar, who let out a grunt of thanks. Sid looked a little nervous, which almost immediately made Spirit nervous.

“First-- got several orders here.” He slid a handful of orders in Spirit’s direction. “And uh. At some point I kinda need to talk to you about something.”

“Not right now I hope,” Spirit replied before uncorking another bottle of wine. From the other end of the restaurant someone let out a shriek, that was soon followed by the sound of loud, high-pitched laughter.

“No, not right now. I was just thinking we could grab some drinks after work. I can pay, if you want.”

Okay. Sid wanting to get alcohol involved wasn’t the best sign, especially if he wanted to pay. Still. Spirit was never one to turn down free drinks.

“How long will it take? I was going to pick up Maka right after work.”

“Not long. Hopefully.”

“Alright.” Spirit eyed him skeptically. “I’ll text Blair and tell her I’ll be a little late.”

“Awesome.”

“Right.” Spirit finished pouring two nearly-identical glasses of wine before handing them over to Sid. “Mind getting these over to table nine? I’m pretty sure Justin just went and bailed in the middle of his shift.”

Sid scowled. “Again? Are you kidding me?”

“Nope.”

“Is he fighting that frat guy again?”

“Nah, I heard he was out of town.”

“So Justin just fucked off in the middle of work, then.”

“Right after he gave me a ton of orders and told me to hurry up with them.”

Sid sighed. “Well, at least we won’t have to deal with property damage tonight.”

“Small miracles.” Spirit tapped at the filled glasses. “Seriously, do you mind?”
“Not at all.” Sid picked up the glasses and headed towards the right table.

Still feeling as though he should be wary of whatever Sid wanted to talk to him about, Spirit watched him go before turning towards the group of young women that had filed in and taken seats at the bar.

“Good evening, ladies,” he said, giving them his most charming smile. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

When his shift finally ended and the restaurant closed, all Spirit wanted to do was go home to Maka, but instead he followed Sid into a nearby bar. They got seated, ordered their drinks, and Sid seemed to hold off on what was on his mind in favor of mainly focusing on meaningless, dumb small talk. In fact, he waited until Spirit had finished his first drink before he started really talking.

“So,” Sid began.

“Finally,” Spirit said, rolling his eyes.

Sid gave him an exasperated look, causing Spirit to grin.

“Just cut to the chase already.” His second martini arrived, and Spirit took it and began to swirl the stirrer around absent-mindedly. “Seriously. I’ve been kept in suspense all evening. Is it really that big of a deal?”

“No,” Sid muttered. “Well-

“Again. Cut to the chase.”

“All right, all right, fine,” Sid grumbled. “I wanted to ask if Nygus could stay.”

Spirit stopped stirring. “Huh?”

“If Nygus could stay. As in, permanently move in.”

He frowned. “I didn’t think she wanted to. She’s never mentioned anything.”

“I mean-” Sid scratched the back of his head. “She’s just having a really, really hard time trying to find an apartment. So I was wondering if her moving in was an option. She doesn’t want to ask since she knows it’s crowded already.”

“So you’re asking for her?”

“She doesn’t know I am,” Sid admitted. “Just thought I’d do her the favor. Scope out that option for her, if you will. So could she?”

Spirit took a second to ponder this. He didn’t have any problem with Nygus moving in, except for the lack of space. But if Stein and Marie were moving out soon, then maybe it wouldn’t be a problem. Unfortunately, that might require some coordinating.

Also, Azusa would probably have something to say about that. But maybe not. Hopefully not.

“I mean,” Spirit finally said, after taking a sip of his drink. “I’m fine with it. The only issue is the space. But if that’s the case, hopefully Stein and Marie will be able to move out soon so that there’ll be more of it.”
“You really think Stein and Marie’ll be able to find an apartment if Nygus can’t?” Sid asked disbelievingly.

“Well-

“Personally, I think they should stay with us. And look, I know you have bad blood with Stein,” Sid added hurriedly, possibly in response to Spirit’s expression. “I’m not questioning that. It’s just-Marie’s definitely going to keep the kid, right?”

Spirit opened his mouth, then closed it before nodding.

“Then maybe she shouldn’t be focused on finding a new place to stay,” Sid went on. “I dunno. It doesn’t really sit right with me that she doesn’t really have a place to stay. I feel like we’re kicking her out, and that’s not the kind of man I am.”

Spirit stared at the ice floating aimlessly inside his glass. He almost didn’t hear Sid say his name.

“--’irit?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Spirit went ahead and downed and half his drink on the spot.

“Uh-” Sid looked visibly startled. “You sure?”

“Yep.” The alcohol was starting to numb his head a bit, which was great. He didn’t think he’d be able to get through that part of the conversation otherwise.

“So…”

“Nygus can stay. I don’t mind.” Spirit drained the rest of his glass, before letting it practically slam against the table. “If that’s what you wanted to ask, then I’m fine with it. She should be the one to talk to the rest of us about it though.”

“No, I know.” Sid was staring at him somewhat warily.

“Is that all?”

“Uh- no. I have been wanting to uh… bring up some concerns about Stein.”

_Fucking hell._ Spirit raised a hand in the air to signal the waitress, who he realized a second too late was nowhere in sight. “Okay.”

“Just real quick,” Sid added. “Nothing bad. It’s just…”

“Just what?” Spirit let his hand drop to the table.

“Okay, I don’t talk smack about people behind their back. That’s not the man I am. You know that.”

“Uh huh.”

“But I’ve officially decided that Stein is a fucking asshole, and I’m honestly not sure what Marie sees in him.”
Spirit sighed. “What did he do?”

“Okay.” Oh, this ought to be good. Sid was shifting forward in his chair, hands coming together in a steeple in front of his mouth and his eyebrows furrowing. “Here’s the thing. I can forgive the horse head. Some people just have weird hobbies! That’s fine. Great in fact, never be afraid to be yourself. I respect that. And I could forgive the whole thing with the sink. Sure, we’ve been washing dishes in the bathroom for a good two weeks now while Azusa tries to get more money from her dad, but that’s fine. That’s fine. I can forgive all that.”

“But?”

“But-” Sid’s hands lowered. “-I do take issue in him eating my food. Specifically, my Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Munky.”

Spirit blinked.

“I buy my Chunky Monkey in little cartons,” Sid went on. “I get one a week, it’s my reward for surviving all the bullshit my bosses put me through for the week. Chunky Monkey is the one thing I live for, Spirit. The one thing I use to drown my sorrows. You have your unhealthy amount of alcohol, I have my ice cream. Simple.”

“Hey-” Spirit began to protest.

“But he’s been eating my Chunky Monkey!” Sid went on. “I’m almost positive it’s him, because he’s the only one awake at the crack of dawn, and that’s when they disappear! I mean, he doesn’t eat all of it, I usually get multiple cartons anyway, but that’s still not fucking cool! Who does that?”

Spirit briefly debated pointing out that he had been the one eating the ice cream, but decided against it. Instead, he let his disbelief at everything Sid had just said show.

“That’s it? That’s what you’re worried about? You’re fine with him breaking our sink and preventing us from washing dishes, you’re fine with the fucking robots, you’re fine with his general creepiness and his not being able to contribute to rent whatsoever, you’re fine with the fucking horse head, but the one thing, the one thing that Stein finally does that pisses you off is eating your ice cream?”

Sid scowled. “It’s my Chunky Monkey, Spirit!”

“That’s seriously the straw that breaks the camel’s back for you? Your freaking ice cream?”

“Well, don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t happy about the horse head or the sink either!”

Spirit threw his hands in the air. “Unbelievable.”

“I’m sorry, I have standards! Unlike some people…”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Nothing. You told me to never bring up last New Year’s again, so…”

“Please shut up.”

“But I have a point.”

“What’s your point?! That your ice cream is more important than not being able to wash the dishes?”

“Okay, first of all-”
Sid was cut off by a shriek, then, just before Spirit could realize what was happening, there was a loud crash of a man being thrown against their table.

Literally *thrown*-- the guy landed on their table as if he had been dropped, and he landed so hard the table cracked in half. Spirit let out a yelp, just barely saving his feet from getting smashed by the splintering wood. His glass exploded, completely dousing the front of his shirt with its contents.

“What the fuck-” Spirit managed to get out through the shock.

“BARRETT!” Someone yelled from the other end of the bar.

Spirit whipped his head around towards the owner of the voice, who was stomping his way over to their now-broken table. He was much older than Spirit would have expected, with messy, slicked-backed white hair, a muscular frame, and narrowed, icy blue eyes.

“Shit,” Spirit heard Sid mutter.

The man who had landed on their table was scrambling frantically out of the way as the old man positioned himself in front of their table, looming over them like the buffest, oldest tower Spirit had ever seen.

“Sid?” Spirit asked, trying not to sound as alarmed as he actually felt. “What’s happening?”

“White Star.” Sid looked more irritated than concerned at this turn of events. “The hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing, asshole,” The old man (White Star?) spat. “I thought I made it clear after our last meeting I didn’t want to see your ugly face again.”

“Trust me, I’m not that happy about seeing yours either.”

White Star looked as though he wanted to grab Sid by the collar and fling him across the room like he did to the other guy. “You’re lucky I’m in a good mood, punk. I’ll give you enough time to pay your bill and get the hell out of here before I kick your ass.”

“Hey!” A man Spirit assumed was the manager had finally come out, and he looked *pissed.* Just as well-there had been some property damage. “The hell are you doing?!”

“I want this man out of here.” White Star pointed at Sid almost self-importantly, as if he was expected the manager to immediately jump to his beck and call. Spirit’s dislike of him increased astronomically. “He’s causing problems. He’s nothing but trouble.”

“You’re the only one causing problems here, buddy,” Spirit snapped, starting to feel like a bystander at this point.

The man glared at him. “And who the fuck are you?”

His rational side was screaming at him to shut the hell up, but Spirit was too irritated to listen. The front of his work uniform was completely doused, and he’d have to pay for it to get washed when he’d just washed it the other day. Not to mention he was full-on threatening Sid, who had just been sitting there and minding his own business before this self-entitled asshole barged in. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Don’t get smart with me, pretty boy,” White Star snarled. “I asked you first. You might want to
show some respect to me.”

Spirit scowled. “Why should I?”

“I said don’t get smart-”

“Hey, hey!” Sid cut in. “Look, we’ll leave, all right? Unlike you, we don’t want any trouble.”

“Someone has to pay for the damage!” The manager added angrily. “If any of you clowns think for one second-!”

“You heard the guy, time to pay up.” Sid passed a handful of bills to the manager. “Keep the change. Come on, Spirit.”

“Hey, I’m not paying for shit!” White Star snapped.

The manager scowled. “You break it, you fix it.”

“Ha ha,” Spirit added, just because he could.

The glare White Star gave him could have killed someone with it’s intensity. Just for a minute, Spirit faltered a bit.

Definitely should have shut up. Oh well. At least they were leaving.

“Come on, Spirit,” Sid hissed.

“I better not see you around here again, Barrett!” White Star yelled after them as they left, the jingle of a bell over the door announcing their departure.

“That took a turn,” Spirit said in an attempt to break the silence on the way over to Blair’s.

“Yeah.” Sid glowered at the ground as they walked, hands crammed in his pockets and clearly brooding over what had just happened.

“Who was that guy anyway?” Spirit asked.

Sid sighed. “He’s an egotistical psychopath who has some stupid beef with me because he’s an asshole. Don’t worry about him.”

“What did you call him? White Star? Is that some sort of weird nickname or something?”

“...Kinda.” Sid didn’t sound as though he wanted to give out details.

“Come on,” Spirit pressed. “Spill. Who was that guy? I won’t tell anyone.”

There was a hesitant pause.

“So a little while ago,” Sid finally began. “My mom took in a kid who was born in prison. His parents had both been given life sentences. I think his mom died recently. My mom’s been taking care of him ever since, but a couple years ago the father somehow got his parole, got out of prison, and got into contact with her to try to see his son again.”

“That’s good,” Spirit remarked.
Sid visibly glowered. “No it wasn’t. There’s a reason he was in prison, and if it were up to me, he never would have gotten out at all.”

“Why? What was he in for?”

“He was the leader of a gang. A nasty one. But that’s not all-- do you remember the Clan Street Massacre?”

“Course I do.” Spirit remembered seeing it everywhere in the news when he was a kid, reading about how a gang skirmish had gotten out of hand during a meetup in an abandoned warehouse. He couldn’t remember how many people, all gang members, had died, but it certainly outweighed the number of those who had survived. “Wait- was the father one of the survivors?”

“Yes,” Sid said grimly. “And there’s rumors he was the one who fired first.”

“How the hell did he get out of prison then?” Spirit asked incredulously.

“No idea. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was something shady going on there. But you could probably guess why no one wanted to let him see his kid.”

“Yikes- wait.” Spirit was starting to connect the dots. “Was the guy in there-”

Sid nodded grimly.

A chill ran down his spine. The man they had just encountered, the man Spirit had mouthed off to, had not only been to prison, but had ran a gang and had been in a fucking massacre. “Hooooly shit.”

“Yup. He’s been harassing Mama ever since. She had to file a restraining order against him. Once she did I thought I’d never see him again, but I guess he’s living around here now.”

“Do you know that for sure?” The fact that a man like that might be lurking around their neighborhood was unsettling. “Do you think he’ll cause trouble?”

“I don’t know,” Sid admitted. “He kinda has a temper.”

As they approached Blair’s building. Spirit remembered the scream of the poor man who had been thrown like a rag doll onto their table, how he’d scrambled out of the way as White Star approached. “No kidding.”

“We here?” Sid asked as Spirit pulled the door open to the lobby.

“Yup.”

“Look,” Sid went on as they walked in and towards the elevator. “If you ever come across him again, don’t be a smartass all right?

“Trust me, I’ll definitely take what you said into consideration.” Spirit pressed the button next to the elevator and waited.

“Spirit,” Sid snapped. “Seriously. Don’t even go near him. Just walk the hell away, okay? He’s a certified maniac.”

Spirit swallowed, remembering how the look in White Star’s eyes as Spirit had mocked him-- remembering how cold his expression was, knowing that if worst came to worst, Spirit probably wouldn’t last two seconds. Which meant if he did run into White Star again, he’d better keep his
Maka had crashed in Spirit’s arms as they’d walked back. Her weight made Spirit’s arms a bit sore from carrying her several blocks, which was a major change from when she was little and could fit easily along the length of his arm. The knowledge that she was growing always caused his heart to ache. The fact that she was starting kindergarten soon was even worse— it was what, a few weeks until her first day?

Utterly. Mindblowing.

“So, Sid, about your ice cream—” The door to their apartment creaked open, and Spirit stopped in his tracks when he saw what was going on. For one thing, the fire escape was wide open, and for another, when Stein turned to face him he saw that he was holding what looked like a very large, very dead bird by the feet.

“Why.” Was all Spirit could say in response.

“Uh.” Sid looked aghast.

“You missed it!” That was Marie, climbing in from the fire escape. “A vulture just smacked head-first into the window.”

“A what?”

“A vulture.” Stein held up the bird for emphasis. It’s head lolled to the side pathetically, and Spirit almost felt sorry for it. “A female turkey vulture, to be precise.”

“Oh that’s lovely,” Sid remarked.

“When did this happen?” Spirit asked in disbelief. “It just hit the window?”

“A little while ago, yeah.” Marie leaned against the ledge of the fire escape. “There was blood everywhere, I just finished cleaning it up. We’re trying to figure out how to get rid of it before Azusa comes back.”

“What’ happenin’?” Maka mumbled, starting to stir a bit in Spirit’s arms at the commotion.

“Nothing, go back to sleep,” Spirit soothed, before staring at the thing swinging from Stein’s hands in disgust. “Good idea. Please get rid of it.”

Stein grinned, suddenly advancing on him and brandishing the unfortunate bird. “Oh come on, come look at it.”

“No no no-” Holding Maka protectively, Spirit immediately backed away from Stein, who only stepped closer. “No, no thank you, get it away from me-”

“What are you going to do with it?” Sid interrupted, taking a step to place himself between them, much to Spirit’s relief. “Toss it in a dumpster or something?”

“I was thinking of stuffing it, actually.” Stein swung the dead bird over his shoulder.

“You were what?” Spirit squawked.
“Papa,” Maka whined into his shoulder.

Spirit winced. “Sorry.”

“I was thinking of stuffing it,” Stein repeated.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Marie remarked. “You can finally use the taxidermy kit.”

“That’s creepy,” Spirit protested. “Stuffing dead animals is creepy. What are you even going to do with it when you’re done?”

“Hang it on the wall or something,” Marie said defensively. “It’s not that creepy.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s literally stuffing corpses!”

“It’s kind of cool.”

“Ugh.” Time for bed. Shifting Maka in his arms, he turned and made a beeline towards the hallway. “At the very least, nobody better find that thing in the fridge.”

“That was one time!” Marie shouted after him, which he ignored.

Spirit had woken up in some terrifying situations before, mostly back in high school. The one that took the cake was coming to after blacking out at a party, where he’d woken up in a stranger’s backyard, missing his pants and with an angry, growling pitbull less than three inches away from his face. The only reason he hadn’t been mauled was that there was a chain that was just barely short enough to keep the dog off of him.

Come to think of it, that was the last big house party he’d been to before Maka had been born.

This time however, there was something ten times worse sitting next to him when he opened his eyes.

“Hi,” Stein said.

“FUCK-!” Spirit jerked up immediately, foot instinctively lashing out and kicking at Stein, which he dodged easily, before he managed to regain some level of composure. “What-what the hell?!”

“Good morning to you too,” Stein said dryly.

“What are you doing?!?” Spirit demanded, trying desperately to get his heart rate under control.

“Where’s Maka?”

“Eating breakfast. Marie made pancakes.”

“Why are you in my room?!” Spirit was well aware he sounded like an angry banshee at this point, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“I needed to ask you a favor.”

“A fav-what?”

“Marie is going to have her first doctor’s appointment tomorrow,” Stein said calmly, ignoring Spirit’s spluttering much to his irritation. “It’s one that’s long overdue. We finally found a good clinic within our price range, but it’s in a part of town that we don’t particularly know very well.
Marie especially has a tendency to get lost.”

“Then get a map,” Spirit grumbled. “And get out of my room!”

“Which would necessarily be a problem if I were there with her.” Again, Stein ignored him. “Unfortunately, I won’t be. I have a job interview I need to go to, one that ends right as her appointment starts. I’ll be there, but I’ll be late, and I won’t be able to be her navigator. That’s where you come in.”

“I-” Spirit was trying to reduce his spluttering at this point, slowly digesting this. His brain felt muddled with sleep and adrenaline, and he wasn’t sure if he was thinking straight yet. He knew Stein was asking him to take Marie to her doctor’s appointment, but... “You- why do I need to be there? Just have her use a map!”

“She has trouble with maps,” Stein said simply.

“Okay, there’s also a thing called a smartphone. I know she has one. It has map apps and a built-in GPS and-probably some other stuff-!”

“She terrible with those too,” Stein replied. “She only has one eye, remember? She can’t be looking at a map and driving, she has no peripheral vision.”

“Okay-but-”

“Her appointment at noon today. Will you be there?”

“I-” Words. What were words? He was having trouble articulating the extent of the frustration and irritation that he felt, between Stein being in his room, Stein scaring the absolute shit out of him and invading his private space, all while asking him to take his girlfriend to her doctor’s appointment. “Are you kidding me?”

“If you say yes, I’ll get out of your room quicker,” Stein offered. “And if it makes you feel any better, the appointment isn’t that long.”

“I-”

“And according to the calendar, nobody else can go. Meaning if you won’t go with her, I’ll miss my job interview, and as a result will miss my chance to get a job.”

Okay. That admittedly wasn’t good.

None of that was good. Stein usually didn’t exaggerate about things, so if Marie’s sense of direction was really as bad as he was saying...

“Will you go?” Stein pressed.

Spirit sighed irritably. “Fine, I will! Get out of my room.”

“Cool.” Stein finally stood, and strode out of his room. “There’s some pancakes left for you too by the way.”

Just like that, Spirit was left alone.

Spirit wasn’t sure if he should feel dumbfounded or angry. Maybe a bit of both. How the hell could was Stein always sounding so casual? It felt surreal.
What time was it anyway? It was Saturday, so he was off and he should have been able to sleep in. Spirit glanced over at the clock.

6:00 AM

That MOTHERFUCKER-

“Thanks for this, Spirit.”

Marie’s voice was soft, soothing. Despite his lingering irritation at everything that had happened that morning, Spirit relaxed a little. No matter how much he thought about it, he really couldn’t bring himself to be angry with Marie.

A part of him had honestly tried. Tried analyzing her motives, thought back to the night over and over, trying to find some reason to be angry with her, but he just couldn’t. Because none of it was really her fault. She just happened to be the instigator of bringing him and Stein together again.

It probably didn’t help that Spirit was all too familiar with their situation, either.

“It’s no problem.” He wasn’t even completely lying. He didn’t mind getting Marie to her doctor’s appointment when her boyfriend couldn’t. He didn’t mind helping her out, and he didn’t mind giving Stein a chance to get a goddamn job. Hell, if it were up to him, he’d be drop-kicking Stein’s scawny ass to school too so that he could get an even better job for a better future for his child.

“Make a left up here.”

Marie frowned. “I feel like it’s a right.”

“Okay.” Marie switched on her blinker.

Tick tick tick tick-

Stein had been lying when he said the clinic was in a city the hadn’t been to before. Truth was, while it was a bit quite a ways away from the apartment, it was still in their general area and when Spirit saw the address, he knew that he, and anyone else in the apartment, could have found it immediately just by looking at the address.

What Stein had not been lying about was Marie’s sense of direction, which was flabbergastingly bad. They’d almost ended up in the exact opposite of where they wanted to go more than once, with Marie insisting that she could almost be certain that they were going the right way.

Hint - they weren’t.

No wonder Stein had wanted someone in the car with her. She never would have made it otherwise.

Which meant Stein really did care for her.

“Can I ask you something?” Spirit asked.

Marie frowned, but her eye remained focused on the road. “What do you want to ask me?”

“What do you see in him?”

He was expecting some hesitation, some sort of pause, but there was none. “He’s intelligent. You might not see it anymore, but he’s a good man at heart. He’s genuine. He’s charming, in his own
Spirit snorted. “Seriously?”

Marie gave him a brief, level look. “He is. He wrestles with his mind on a daily basis, and he’s come an incredibly long way. He has a lot of strength.”

Despite everything, Spirit had to admit this was true. Part of the reason he’d been keeping an eye on Stein as much as he had was that he was worried about Stein losing touch with reality. But all the signs he recognized from when they were younger, Stein’s eyes glazing over, Stein jumping at every slight movement, Stein fixating on a certain point in midair to watch something that wasn’t there. Signs that were an all too common sight when they were especially young, and gradually lessened as they got older.

He’d seen none of that so far since Stein had moved in. The only thing that really bothered him was that every now and then, Stein would shut himself in his and Marie’s room and not come out for what felt like a while, until Spirit would suddenly walk into a room and he’d be sitting there with a cigarette or a book or a cup of coffee.

“How did you meet him?” Spirit asked, before noticing that the next turn was coming up. “Crap-turn here.”

“Oh!” Marie flicked on her blinker again. The car lurched to the side, earning an irritable honk from another car as she turned.

“Sorry,” She hissed under her breath. “Sorry, what was that Spirit?”

“How did you two meet?”

“Oh.” Then there was hesitation before she spoke again. “About three years ago, I got involved in a sort of pen pal program. It was sort of part of a rehabilitation thing, I thought it was a cool thing to do, and I figured it would look good on my college application, so why not?”

“Rehabilitation?”

“The idea is that we were supposed to communicate with patients at a mental health facility. It was supposed to increase their social interaction, help them connect to new people, that sort of thing.”

Spirit almost snorted once he turned that information over in his mind. The whole scenario sounded like the plot of a Hallmark movie.

“So I sent my letter out, and eventually I got a reply from a kid a year younger. I think you can guess who it was.”

“Yeah.” Spirit pointed up ahead. “Left.”

“Okay.” The blinker was switched on again.

Tick tick tick tick-

“So there you have it,” Marie finished, once the car moved to the next lane and slowly cruised to a stop at the red light. She glanced over at him, eye focusing on him and searching his face curiously. “Why do you ask?”

“I was curious.” Spirit watched as two teenage girls crossed the street in front on them, giggling
over their brightly-colored smoothies. “Honestly, I’ve been curious.”

“Yeah.” Marie’s eye drifted downcast. “Look, I know it’s probably been difficult having Stein around, but thank you. For everything. I’m still not sure when I’ll find an apartment, but I promise we’ll move out as soon as we can.”

Sid’s words from the night before rang in his ears - *You really think Stein and Marie’ll be able to find an apartment if Nygus can’t?* “You haven’t found an apartment yet?”

“Not yet,” Marie admitted. “But I think I’m getting close. I’m sure I’ll find one.”

“All right.” Spirit tried not to let his unease show.

The light turned green. Marie sped forward.

“You know, if you can’t…” Spirit trailed off.

"Yeah?” Marie asked.

“Uh. It’s right up there on your left.”

“Oh. Okay.”

*Tick tick tick tick-

The doctor was a man named Pushka, who had the thickest mustache and the thickest Russian accent Spirit had ever heard in his life, but against all odds somehow still managed to be understandable.

“Marie...Jolner?” He squinted at the clipboard.

“Mjolnir.” Marie corrected as she stood, Spirit following her up semi-awkwardly.

“My mistake. Come on in.” He gestured for them to follow him from the waiting room and down a starkly white painted hallway, which they did. "This is your first exam?"

"It is.

"Well, as you should know I'm Dr. Pushka." As soon as they got a small exam room, the man stuck his clipboard under his arm to extend a hand out for Marie to shake, before shooting a wink at Spirit. "I have to say, you're a lucky man."

Spirit blinked. "Huh?"

"Well, you've found a very beautiful woman!" Pushka gave Marie a warm smile.

It took a second for the implication to sink in. "Oh- oh no, you got it all wrong, I'm just a-"

"Friend," Marie cut in quickly, with a somewhat strained smile. "This is Spirit. He's just a friend. My boyfriend'll be along later."

"Ah. My mistake." Pushka gestured. "Well, I hope he comes soon. Sit down, both of you."

Minutes ticked by. Stein didn’t show, much to Spirit’s irritation. He sat in a horribly uncomfortable chair, watching as Puska drew Marie’s blood, and tuned out as she started questioning him about
birth options. Just as she was starting to get quizzed about her medical history, Spirit’s phone buzzed, and she and the doctor glanced over at him.

“Sorry, I gotta take this.” He didn’t really, he didn’t even recognize the number on the screen, he just wanted something to distract him from the mind-numbing sitting in silence. Spirit made a beeline for the door, only to nearly collide with the current bane of his existence.

“Where were you?” Spirit snapped.

“My bus was late.” At least he sounded somewhat apologetic, but that seemed to be mostly for Marie’s benefit as he immediately headed over to her. “Sorry.”

“It’s about time.” Marie kissed him on the cheek. “How did it go?”

“Fine. Hopefully. I don’t think they’ve seen all of my records.”

“Oh, good.”

“Er-you must be the boyfriend.” Pushka gestured at Stein to sit down, eyeing him warily. “We’re almost done here, go ahead and sit down.”

Shaking his head, Spirit closed the door behind him and answered the still-buzzing phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello?” An unfamiliar voice answered.

“Hi. Who’s this?”

“You’re not Azusa.” The voice sounded confused. “Where’s Azusa?”

Wait, what? The same Azusa Spirit knew? “Azusa?”

“Yes. Azusa. She’s short, with glasses, and she’s very stern looking.

Definitely the Azusa then. “Azusa Yumi?”

“Yes! That’s her. Can I talk to her? Wait...why do you have her phone?” The man suddenly sounded suspicious.

“I think you have the wrong number. I’m her roommate.”

“Roommate?” The man sounded surprised.

“Yeah. Who is this?”

“Azusa’s father.”

Spirit blinked. “Wait, what?”

“So which one are you?”

“Huh?” How the hell did Azusa’s father get his number? “Which one?”

“Yeah! Which roommate are you? Are you the creepy homeless man who likes corpses, the tattooed muscled man who lost a fight to a pregnant lady, or the alcoholic who got his girlfriend pregnant?”
Of all the things he was expecting to hear, that was not it.

“Wait- what?”

“Which one?” The other man pressed.

What the hell was Azusa telling her dad about them? “Uh-alcoholic?”

“Oh!” Mr. Yumi suddenly sounded excited. “I remember Azusa talking about you. You’re Spencer.”

“Spirit, actually-”

“What?”

“Spirit. That’s my name. Not Spencer.”

“Are you sure?” Why did he sound suspicious?

“Yeah, last I checked.”

“Well, I’m sure that’s what people call you, but I doubt that’s your real name. If you don’t mind, I prefer calling people by their real names.”

“But that is my real name-” Spirit protested.

“You know, Azusa complains about you the most by far. Asides from the creepy homeless man. Can I talk to her now?”

Spirit bit back his protests. You know what? It’s fine. And of course she complains about me the most. “She’s not here.”

“She’s not?”

“I’m at a hospital. Azusa’s not with me. And my name really is Spirit.”

“Oh.” Mr. Yumi sounded crestfallen. “A hospital? No one’s dying, right?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Is Marie all right?”

“Yeah-wait, do you know Marie?”

“Of course. She’s a sweet girl. I know she’s expecting. Is she all right?”

“She’s just getting a checkup, she’s fine. Look, I’ll tell Azusa you called all right? You uh, might want to get your contacts fixed. I don’t know how you ended up calling me-”

“Oh simple, your contact is right next to Azusa’s. I have you as “Spencer Roommate” and I have Azusa as “Spud.””

“Spud?”

“Yes.” Mr. Yumi’s voice turned fond. “When she was born, I’d wrap her up in her blankets until she’d look like a little potato. My little Spud. Don’t tell her though.”
Spirit only just barely managed to muffle the demented, high-pitched giggle-snort from behind his hand.

“Are you choking?”

“Nope,” Spirit squeaked. Thank you sir, that was the best thing I’ve heard all day. “I’m fine.”

“You’ll tell her I called?”

“Yep.” Spirit wiped his eyes. I’m dead, oh my god. “I will.”

“Thank you! Have good day, Spencer.”

“It’s Spirit—”

The line went dead. Oh well. He’d just had the greatest conversation in his life.

“Are you crying?”

Spirit glanced up to see Marie and Stein, standing side-by-side and staring at him quizzically.

“Nope, I’m fine.” Spirit wiped his eyes again. “Are you done?”

“Yep.” Marie glanced at the phone in his hand. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s great.” Spud. Jesus christ, I’m living.

“Okay…” Marie still looked mildly concerned, but she didn’t further question it. “You’re going to take a bus back, right?”

Oh crap, that was right. “Yeah, I have work.” Technically his shift didn’t start for another hour or so, but it was an excuse to not have to drive home in the same car as Stein so he’d take it. Shoot, what time was his bus again? Soon, he knew. “I should probably go.”

“Okay.” Marie surprised him a bit by giving him a smaller version of her smile, a bright, sunny one that Spirit couldn’t help but start associating with her. “Thank you again.”

She glanced over at Stein expectantly, but he’d already started turning, preparing to walk off in the opposite direction. When she glared at him, he stopped.

“What?” He asked.

Marie sighed. “Nothing. See you later, Spirit.” The latter was spoken with an almost apologetic look sent at Spirit and another more awkward smile, before the two of them disappeared down the hall.

The pure amusement at hearing Azusa’s dumb childhood nickname had quickly dissipated.

It’s fine, he tried to reason with himself. You did your good deed for the say. Just move on with your day and it’ll fine.
up from the apartment and dropping her off at Blair’s, Spirit walked into the restaurant a half hour before his shift started thinking about finishing the book he’d picked up a little while ago from a thrift store.

Only to stop in his tracks when he recognized a familiar head of silver hair right smack in one of the middle tables.

“Oi, Spirit,” Stein called.

Nope, nope, I’m fucking done. Spirit stormed forward and slammed his hands angrily on the surface of the table in front of Stein, who just blinked up at him.

“I already went with your girlfriend to her doctor’s appointment,” Spirit snarled. “One that you missed most of, by the way! What do you want now?”

“I just think we should talk.” Stein gestured to the chair in front of him. “Sit.

“I have work-”

“You don’t start for at least a half an hour. It’s on the calendar.”

Oh right. Fuck.

“I’m not sitting down.” Spirit crossed his arms in front of him.

“Spirit. I just want to talk. I’d like to resolve some things.”

Spirit hadn’t been expecting that. “Huh?”

“Marie suggested I give you space. Which I did, and it solved nothing.” Stein leaned onto his arms. “You avoid me at every given chance. You don’t give me a chance to speak to you. I’ve been living under your roof for a week, I’ve had plenty of chances to continue my experiments on you-”

Cold terror shot down Spirit’s spine, leaving him frozen.

“But I didn’t. Haven’t I proved I’m trustworthy?”

“Fuck off.” Spirit shoved past him. Or tried to anyways - a cold hand closed around his wrist and he froze in his tracks.

“I’d still like to talk.” Spirit could barely hear Stein over the pounding of his own heartbeat. “Sit down.”

He obeyed, thankfully leading to Stein letting go of him. He heard him clear his throat, silent as Spirit slowly managed to collect himself, clenching his fists and focusing on the man in front of him.

“I’m sitting,” Spirit said flatly.

“I noticed.” Stein held out an unlit cigarette. “Want one?”

“I quit. You should too.”

“I don’t smoke when Marie’s in the same room as me.”

“You should still quit. The fumes are damaging to the baby.”
“I will eventually.” Stein flipped the butt end of the cigarette towards Spirit before taking out a lighter.

“You can’t smoke in here.”

“No one cares.” Stein gestured at the surrounding room. “It’s a slow business day for you.”

That was true. Asides for them, there was only a small group murmuring around the bar and a family sitting in the far corner.

“Still. Put it away, I don’t want you to get me in trouble.”

“Fine.” Stein flipped the lighter closed. “Feel better now?”

“No I freaking don’t!” Spirit spat. Anger was quickly festering among his previous terror, and he was ready to lash out. “I should walk out right now.”

“You could,” Stein replied. “Just like you can go to Marie right now and tell her you want us to leave. She’d do it, you know.”

“I-that’s different!”

“Not particularly. Either way, I am grateful for your efforts to help us, despite what you may think.” Stein flipped the lighter around in his fingers before sliding it into his coat pocket. “And I hope that means you’ll be willing to forgive me.”

Forgive.

Spirit stared down at his hands, clenching his fists so hard that the nails bite into his skin. Indignant voices screamed at the back of his head-

(the scalp glints as it catches the light, and his skin was slowly, slowly peeled back like wallpaper-) 

You woke up screaming for months and Kami was the only one there to help you-

What once had been important memories with the kid you’d known for so long were all ruined, just by that-

(-glint-) 

...but there’s still a part of you that wants to forgive him.

“Am I right?” Stein asked.

Spirit met his eyes dead on. Blank, steely eyes that had been a source of terror for so long.

And once he met them, it was surprisingly easy to hold that gaze.

“Do you regret it?” Spirit asked.

Stein was silent. For a second, Spirit almost thought he wasn’t going to answer.

“Ultimately, yes.”

“Ultimately?”
“Yes. Primarily, the outcomes in particular. I don’t regret being sent to an institution.”

That actually surprised Spirit. One of his primary fears had been that Stein would be angry over the time he spent locked up. “Really?”

“Because I’m actually better.” Stein actually smiled a bit. “Remember how I used to tell you about the shadows? The whispers?”

“Yeah.” Because in all honesty, he’d never forget it. Never forget Stein, who had been so small and unassuming back then, admit to him and only him that there were shadow figures that surrounded him, whispered to him, told him things he didn’t know. Told him how to dissect, taught at an early age.

He’d never forget learning about the absolute screaming hell that was inside his best friend’s head.

“They’re almost gone now. They come up every now and again in my dreams, but my head feels clearer than it has in my entire life. That’s why I don’t regret it.”

“Wow.” So there definitely was an improvement then. Stein’s head was screwed on a bit more straight now, calmer and much less on the edge than when he was a kid.

“I do regret however,” Stein went on. “How we parted ways. How you never wanted anything to do with me again.”

Through what felt out of nowhere, a lump formed in Spirit’s throat.

“That I do regret. Does that answer your question?”

Spirit swallowed, giving him a short nod.

He was being sincere. The longer they talked, the more Spirit realized how Stein was still, despite everything, pretty easy to read. There was no trace of dry, faint mockery. None in the slightest.

Still. Something nagged at him.

“Marie has been scouring everywhere for a new apartment because we’ve been at odds, and I’d like to relieve her of her search,” Stein went on. Especially since it’s a source of stress that her body doesn’t need. I understand that our relationship won’t be the same as what it was in the past, but I hope we can make amends. This is something I am being genuine about, Spirit.”

Heavy silence.

Forgive.

Could he though?

He honestly had no idea.

...but you do want to try.

A part of you desperately, desperately wants to try.

Or maybe there was a third option.

His mama had always told him to believe in second chances. His mama had treated Stein like a second son, and Stein had treated her as more of his mother than he did his actual mother.
When Stein had been arrested, his mama had been silent for weeks.

A second chance wasn’t forgiveness though. A second chance was a chance at forgiveness, a restart, in a sense. A second chance could rebuild a bridge that had once been burned.

Heal wounds that felt as though they couldn’t fade.

“Fine.” Spirit’s voice was so quiet he could barely hear himself. “Fine. You really want to make amends? We’ll try to make amends.”

Naturally, Stein could hear him anyway. “And Marie and I can stay?”

*You might regret this.*

“Sure.”

Stein stared at him, and Spirit saw a brief flash of surprise.

“Thank you.” Stein stood. “Your shift should be starting soon. I’ll leave you to it. You did tell me not to get you fired. Unless that no longer stands?”

“No, it definitely stands. Do not get me fired.”

“Noed.”

And then Stein was gone.

Despite Stein being right and that his shift was probably going to start within minutes, Spirit sat at the table with his mind reeling, slowly trying to make sense of everything that was spinning through his head and the nagging feeling in his the pit of his gut.

*Stein didn’t actually apologize for what he did to you, did he? The back of his mind whispered. He said he regretted the consequences, but he doesn’t regret hurting you.*

*You know it’s true.*

But he’d already agreed, hadn’t he?

About a week later, their lease was updated so that it included Nygus as a permanent resident. The less official change was that he’d asked if he and Marie would stay more permanently.

*Second chances,* he told himself.

Second chances.
“Spirit! Spirit-”

It was like getting dunked with a cold bucket of water. The terror was so deep in his bones that waking up was a shock to his system. His heart was pounding so hard he could feel it throughout his entire body. What felt like a weight on his chest made it almost hurt to breathe. Someone was gripping his shoulders, a chorus of voices saying his name over and over.

“-Wait, is he awake?”

“Yeah- yeah he’s awake!”

“Oh thank god-”

That last voice was Sid. He and Marie were kneeling in front of Spirit. He could see Stein and Nygus standing behind them, and that Maka was clinging to Stein’s arm with wide, scared eyes.

“M-Ma-” His daughter’s name was the first on his lips, but his chest was so tight that it felt like he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak.

“It’s okay.” That was Marie, voice hushed and soothing. “Spirit, it’s okay. You’re okay. Everything’s okay.”

"Papa--" Spirit saw Maka wriggle forward and wrap her arms around his neck like vise.

Spirit clung back easily, closing his eyes and greedily grasping for the feel of his daughter's heartbeat, slowly soothing him back into rationality.

Minutes later, Maka was curled up tight against Spirit’s side on the couch like a baby monkey, face pressed into his shoulder. He stroked through her hair with one hand, the motion just as soothing for him as for her.

Marie was in the kitchen, bustling around. Everyone else was scattered around the living room-- Nygus curled up in the armchair, Sid and Azusa sitting on the couch next to Spirit and Maka, Stein sitting on the nearby loveseat.

“Night terror, huh?” Nygus was saying.

“Yeah.” Embarrassed didn’t even begin to cover what Spirit was feeling-- waking your entire apartment up with your screaming did that. Especially since he hadn’t had a terror that bad in- well, since Stein was put on trial.

“Well that was really, really scary,” Sid was saying, had been saying over and over for the past several minutes. “Jesus christ, we couldn’t get you to wake up for a long time-”

“It was a bit of a shock,” Azusa agreed, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and propping her chin in her hands.

“Sorry,” was all Spirit felt he could say in response, feeling himself flush a bit despite the still-
fading adrenaline rush that had come from the sheer amount of terror he’d just woken up from. Everyone was giving him wary, concerned looks that a part of him immediately recoiled from, screamed that he should just crawl back into his room and never come back.

“Don’t be sorry,” Nygus said, quickly. “We’re just glad you’re okay.”

“We thought someone had broken in and that you were getting murdered,” Sid added.

“Really?” Spirit asked in surprise.

“Yep,” Marie said as she emerged from the kitchen, a platter containing six filled mugs in her hands.

“What actually happened?” Spirit asked.

“Maka came into our room freaking out,” Nygus replied. “She said you were like- what did you say, honey?”

“He was rocking back and forth,” Maka mumbled into Spirit’s shirt, semi-sleepily. “Acting really creepy. Twitching and mumbling and stuff. Woke me up.”

“And then you started screaming,” Marie added, placing the platter on the coffee table and handing one of the mugs to Spirit. “And everyone came running.”

“Hot chocolate?” Spirit asked, glancing down at the contents. Sure enough, inside there was liquidy chocolate goodness and a marshmallows floating on top. “Ooh. Thanks.”

“Thought it would soothe our nerves.” Marie handed a smaller mug to Maka, who sat up to take it eagerly.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie.”

“It did sound like you were getting murdered,” Azusa agreed, picking up one of the mugs from the tray. “Even if you weren’t, whatever was happening sounded incredibly unpleasant.”

“That one's Stein’s,” Marie said quickly, leaning over to take it from her and pass it to Stein.

“What’s the difference?”

“He’s lactose intolerant. His has soy milk.”

“Oh.”

“Seriously,” Sid went on. “Everyone was coming into your room ready to kick some ass. It was kind of awesome. Stein had an actual gun?”

Spirit couldn’t have heard that right. “He had a what?”

Almost immediately, Stein pulled a pistol from...his pajama pants? Where did he pull it from? He brandished it in midair, the glint of the dim light reflecting off the metal.

“Oh my god!” Azusa practically jumped out of her chair. “You- what-”

“Are you allowed to have that?” Spirit near-shrieked.
“Probably not,” Stein replied, sounding completely unconcerned.

“Then why-”

“Spirit, as everyone has been saying, you were screaming like you were getting murdered so naturally we assumed as much.”

“Put it away Franken,” Marie said almost absent-mindedly, handing Nygus her hot chocolate.

“Fine.” Stein got to his feet and headed down the hallway, presumably to put it back in his and Marie’s room, much to Spirit’s relief.

“Yeah, I’m not sure whether I’m reassured by that or terrified,” Sid went on. “But yeah, Stein had the gun, I had my crossbow-”

“You had your what?”

“My crossbow.” The way Sid said it was way too casual for his liking. "And Nygus had her machete-”

"It’s just a knife," Nygus said with a scowl. "Don't exaggerate."

"Are you kidding? That thing is way too big to be a regular knife."

Spirit had no idea how to respond to any of this information. “Oh my god.”

“I don’t remember seeing Azusa though,” Marie said. "Azusa, where were you?"

“I was in my room,” Azusa responded, a bit sheepishly.

“What were you doing in there?” Sid asked.

“Again, as everyone is reiterating over and over, it sounded like Spirit was getting brutally murdered and I wanted no part in that. So uh... I stayed in my room and locked the door.”

Everyone stared at her in disbelief.

“What?” Azusa snapped defensively.


Sid snorted. “And I thought you were the communal one.”

“It was the best course of action until I could figure out what to do!”

“Guess I know who I want on my zombie apocalypse team,” Sid went on. “Literally everyone but Azusa.”

“I wasn’t going to stay there!” Azusa protested. “I was just trying to figure out what to do!”

“Everyone but Azusa,” Spirit agreed. “I can’t believe you would have left me to die!”

“I didn’t!”

“You did!”

“Just for future reference,” Nygus interrupted. “Does this happen a lot, Spirit?”
“It hasn’t for a long time,” Spirit admitted, shifting uncomfortably. He was vaguely aware of Stein coming back into the room and sitting back down where he was before and glancing at him curiously.

“You know, there has to be ways to alleviate nightmares,” Azusa went on. “Maybe have some tea?”

“Sure,” Spirit said dryly. “Maybe some magic plants afterwards too.”

Azusa glared at him. “Fine. Wake up screaming every night then.”

“Tea’s not a bad idea,” Marie pointed out. “It might help.”

“Try a sleeping mask,” Stein said.

Spirit blinked, not really expecting a suggestion from him. “A sleeping mask?”

“Yeah. It’ll filter the light, which affects your R.E.M. cycle.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Try it.”

“Alright.” Why not? “Sounds better than tea.”

Talking so casually with Stein still felt a little weird, though Spirit supposed he’d have to get used to it. They had technically made up, hadn't they? And doing so was the best for this situation, anyway.

And a part of Spirit honestly welcomed it. It felt kind of nice to talk to Stein like he used to, interact with him like he used to. He’d missed him, and Spirit was gradually getting more used to the idea.

_And maybe, just maybe, I won’t have to be afraid of you anymore._

“What do you have against tea?” Azusa was scowling at him irritably.

“Nothing. I’ve just never been crazy about it.”

“Well, calming tea is usually incredibly effective. It could also be used as a substitute for coffee.”

Spirit snorted. “Nothing’s a substitute for coffee.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Oh please. Team coffee for the win.”

Azusa rolled her eyes before standing. “Well, if the crisis is over, I’m going back to my room.”

“Hey wait!” Nygus cut in. “If we’re all up, we might as well play a game or something. To calm our nerves.”

“Play a game?” Azusa asked incredulously.

“Yeah! Why not? It’ll be fun. Like a sleepover.”

“It’s three in the morning,” Sid pointed out.
“We have work tomorrow,” Azusa agreed. "And class."

“Oh come on,” Nygus protested. “Just one game! And then we’ll go back to bed.”

Sid eyed her suspiciously. "What do you want to do?"

"Nothing!" Was it just Spirit, or did Nygus look a bit too innocent? "I just thought it would be fun."

“That may not be a bad idea,” Marie said thoughtfully. “It might be good to end tonight on a positive note. I have Scrabble and Monopoly in the other room.”

“Not Monopoly, we’ll be up all night,” Spirit protested.

“I have a better idea.” Nygus got to her feet and headed down the hall. “Be right back. No one move.”

“Scrabble sounds fun,” Sid said absent-mindedly.

“Can I play?” Maka’s head popped up from where it was resting on Spirit’s shoulder.

“Got it!” Nygus popped out from the hallway, grinning wickedly from ear-to-ear.

In her hands, was a Ouija board.

“No,” Sid said firmly.

“Oh, come on.”

“Hell no!” Spirit agreed vehemently. “Are you kidding me? No no no no no-”

“Don’t be a puss- uh, weenie.” Nygus’ eyes darted briefly to Maka before continuing. “Come on, it’ll be fun. It’s the best time to do it too-3 AM is witching hour. We’ll know exactly what spirits are haunting this apartment.”

“I don’t want to know what spirits are haunting this apartment! This is a terrible idea!”

“Oh come on-”

“Nygus. I am this close to getting my crucifix. Anyone have any holy water?”

Nygus looked desperately at Azusa.

“Sorry,” Azusa said firmly. “I’m going to give that a hard no too.”

“Okay fine.” Nygus tucked the board under her arm. “I have a better idea. Meet me the kitchen in fifteen minutes.”

“Exactly fifteen minutes?” Sid asked.

“Maybe sixteen.” Nygus darted into the kitchen.

“I’m scared,” Azusa muttered.

“Me too,” Spirit grumbled.

Fifteen minutes later (although maybe it was sixteen) found them staring, completely
dumbfounded, at the scene before them. The kitchen had been completely transformed— and not at all
in a good way.

Nygus had apparently drawn a demon-summoning circle (an exorcist’s circle? What was it called?
Fuck if he knew, he’d only seen one episode of *Supernatural* onto the floor with what Spirit hoped
was just red paint. Candles were placed around the circle, and one of the kitchen chair sat in the
middle of it like a bizarre centerpiece.

Nygus stood to the side while everyone stared at the scene before them. There was a manic,
excited glint in her eyes that almost made her almost look insane next to the absolutely terrifying
display she had created.

“What the actual f—” Azusa began, before Spirit elbowed her in the side because his daughter was
still present (oh god, *his* poor Maka, this was probably going to scar her for life).

“What’s going on?” Maka asked, not looking quite as terrified as Spirit felt, but just as completely
lost.

“This is better than the Ouija board how?” Marie finally asked.

“It is!” Nygus cried. “Okay, I’ll admit it doesn’t look like it—”

“But in the slightest,” Sid said, looking as resigned as anyone could be, as if he was used to this.
And Spirit wondered, briefly, if he actually was. Maybe Nygus actually pulled this sort of shit all
the time.

He silently wished he had known about this side of her before he had said he was fine with
her permanently living with with the rest of them.

“But the whole point of this is to expel any evil spirits that might be residing within us, not talking
to them.” At their continued flabbergasted stares, Nygus made a sound of protest. “What??”

“So you’re saying you want to perform an exorcism?” Stein asked.

“Yes! Exactly.”

“Yeah, I’m done.” Spirit took Maka’s hand. “Come on Maka, we’re going to bed.”

“Oh, come on!” Nygus pleaded. “I told you, we’re banishing evil spirits, not summoning them. It’s
a *good* ritual!”

“Why do you even want to do this?! Are you *trying* to summon a demon?!”

“A demon?” Maka’s eyes went wide.

“It’s not summoning, it’s *banishing*—”

“She’s right,” Stein pointed out.

Nygus nodded approvingly at Stein. “Thank you.”

“I mean, this is still pretty ridiculous.”

“No, it’s *not*.”

“It’s weird, that’s for sure,” Azusa grumbled.
“There’s no such thing as evil spirits,” Stein continued. “This is all bogus.”

“Look, can we just try it once?” Nygus pleaded. “Please? And then we can play Scrabble like Marie wanted, I guess.”

“But why do you even want to do this?” Spirit whined.

Nygus shrugged. “I dunno. Why not?”

Spirit resisted the urge to smack his palm to his face. Or cry. He was really tired after all.

“Papa I wanna see.” Maka tugging at his sleeve cut him off completely.

Spirit stared down at his daughter in shock. “Really?”

“If it’s banishing evil spirits, then it’s probably good right?”

“See?” Nygus gestured to Maka excitedly. “Your daughter wants to see us expel an evil spirit.”

“You shouldn’t get your hopes up,” Stein told Maka. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“You don’t know that,” Spirit snapped at him as Maka’s face fell in disappointment. “For all we know, we could die.”

“Nah, at the most we’ll get possessed,” Sid said thoughtfully. “I doubt we’ll actually die-”

“That’s not helping.”

“It probably wouldn’t hurt though,” Marie pointed out. “I don’t think anyone’s going to be able to go back to sleep anyway, so we might as well go through with this.”

“Good point,” Azusa remarked, somewhat glumly.

Spirit stared at them incredulously. “Seriously? You want to do this?”

“I want to go back to bed,” Azusa grumbled.

Marie just shrugged. “I mean... it could be fun! And at least we’d know we aren’t possessed by evil spirits.”

Sid suddenly snickered.

“What?”

“Just-” He pointed at Spirit. “Evil spirit.”

They stared at him.

“Get it? Because his name’s Spirit.”

Spirit sighed. “So we're really going do this?”

“Sure,” Marie said, shrugging.

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Stein repeated.

"I still want to go to bed," Azusa muttered.
"Then go to bed," Stein replied.

"I'm not going to bed when there's goddamn *demon summoning* or whatever it is that's going on here-"

"Alright!" Nygus clapped her hands together, pointedly interrupting the two of them. "So who wants to be exorcised?"

"Nose goes," Sid said quickly.

"Hey wait-" Spirit began.

Too late. Everyone, even Maka, had placed their hand over their nose and were now looking at him expectantly.

"Hey, wait-" Spirit repeated, more frantically this time.

"Looks like you’re the tribute," Sid said.

"Come on!" Nygus cheerfully took him by the arm and pulled him over to the accursed chair, shoving him down into it. "The tribe has spoken. You need to be exorcised."

"No, no!" Spirit protested. "No, I do *not* need to be exorcised, if anyone’s possessed it’s probably *Stein-*"

"That sounds like something an evil spirit would say," Stein pointed out dryly.

"So he *is* an evil *Spirit,*" Sid said with a grin.

"Oh, that works better," Marie said approvingly.

"Stop it!" Spirit said angrily. "And I thought you-" he glared at Stein, "-didn’t believe in this stuff!"

"I don’t," Stein replied. "This is just kind of entertaining. Please continue, Nygus."

"Hey-"

"Okay everyone!" Nygus clapped her hands. "Gather round!

*Oh god, this is how I die,* Spirit thought faintly as he watched everyone move around the circle of candles and fake blood he was sitting in the middle of. Nygus moved behind him and he felt one of her cold hands rest on his shoulder. The other picked up a water bottle, raising it up in the air next to his face.

"I’m going to *die,*" Spirit moaned.

Sid gave him a thumbs up. "You got this man."

"Can I go next?" Maka piped up excitedly.

Horror seized Spirit almost immediately. He knew she probably didn’t understand the entirety of what was happening, but the thought of his little girl getting an goddamn *exorcism* was just way too much for him to handle at the moment. "Maka, *no-*"

"We’ll begin by blessing this water." Nygus cut him off, holding the bottle of water aloft. "In the
name of Jesus Christ, I bless this water.”

She twisted the lid off, poured a few drops onto her hand, and flicked it into Spirit’s face.

“Does it burn?” she asked.

“No.” Spirit scrunched his eyes shut.

“That’s a good sign. Here we go then.” Both of her hands settled on his shoulders. “Spirits, we are gathered here today to find out if there is a demon inside of Mister Spirit Albarn.”

“Amen,” Sid called.

“Quiet. Now Spirit-” He felt her lean over his shoulder so that her mouth was right next to his ear. “You get nightmares, yes?”

“Well, obviously,” Azusa pointed out.

“Night terrors, actually,” Spirit corrected.

“Same thing,” Nygus continued. “Now-”

“It’s not the same thing, actually, night terrors happen when- ow!”

Nygus had flicked him in the ear to shut him up. “Do you ever see a shadowy figure in your dreams?”

“Uh... I don’t remember my dreams.” Spirit racked his brain, trying to remember. “Maybe? Yes? No. Wait-”

“Well, I see him right now, in my mind’s eye. We now have to give this demon, who is inside of you, a name.”


“Well, it’s part of the ritual. What do you want to name it?”

Spirit glanced over at his roommates. “What am I supposed to name a demon?”

“Cthulhu?” Marie suggested.

“The Dude,” Sid said, completely deadpan.

Spirit couldn’t help the high-pitched snort that escaped from his mouth, but soon enough he was trying to stop himself from giggling.

Nygus looked mildly irritated. “Might want to go with something a bit more standard.”

“Can I name it Stein?” Spirit asked.

Stein scowled at him, and Spirit took a small, petty amount of pleasure at that.

“That might get confusing,” Azusa pointed out. “Because chances are Stein really is possessed by a demon, and as a result your demon probably won’t know what to do.”

“Probably shouldn’t name it Azusa then, either.”
“Oh, you’re hilarious.”

“I have a name!” Maka cut in, proudly.

“You... do?” Spirit asked, eyes going wide.

Maka nodded, proudly. “Winnie.”

“Winnie?” Marie asked, eyebrows raising.

“Like Winnie the Pooh!”

Sid lost it, laughing so hard that Spirit was almost positive at this point that they were going to wake the neighbors.

“Winnie the Pooh!” He gasped. “Name the demon Winnie the Pooh!”

Maka scowled. “It’s a good name, Sid!”

*What the hell is happening?* Spirit thought faintly.

“I like that actually,” Nygus decided, grin wide and eyes dancing as her hands pressed into Spirit’s temples. “Now, Winnie-- are you here with us?”

Silence.

Was it Spirit’s imagination, or did the candle flames rise a bit?

Probably his imagination.

*Hopefully* his imagination.

“Do you feel anything?” Nygus asked, hushed.

“Your hands are cold, but that’s about it,” Spirit muttered.

“Oh, so.” Nygus stepped around him, then kneeled in front of him, pulling out her phone. “Now I’m going to read a ritual, and if there is an evil spirit inside of you, it will try to force its way out of your body. Which would probably be incredibly painful, and you’d probably die. If not, then you’re good.”

“Awesome.” Spirit’s voice cracked a little. “Can we get this over with, please?”

“Calm down. Now, everyone has to look deep into your eyes to make this work, so everyone, come closer.”

Soon enough, Spirit found himself with his daughter’s and his roommates’ faces nearly pressed up against his, so close he could feel six individual breaths on his face.

“Hey Spirit.” Stein grinned at him.

“I think this is too close.” Spirit tried to scooch back a bit in the chair.

“I agree,” Azusa said uncomfortably.

“No, it’s perfect.” Nygus began scrolling on her phone. “Okay, just for the record, this is a legit thing that I’m going to read, so no one should be making fun or laugh at this, all right? If we do
Spirit might actually get possessed by a demon.”

“Yeet,” Sid warbled in response.

“I’m serious,” Nygus hissed as Marie and Maka giggled. “These are dark forces we’re playing with here.”

“I’m definitely going to die then,” Spirit grumbled.

“Okay.” Nygus cleared her throat. “We exorcise you, every impure spirit, every satanic power, every incursion of the infernal adversary, every legion, every congregation and diabolical sect. Therefore, diabolical legions, we adjure you, cease to deceive human creatures, and to give to them the poison of eternal damnation; ...Be gone, Satan, inventor and master of all deceit, enemy of man's salvation. Be humble...” She paused, squinting at her phone. “Wait, this is all longer than I thought it was.”

“Are you kidding me?” Spirit hissed.

“It is! It’s like ten pages, I don’t want to read all this.” She showed him her phone screen, scrolling through for emphasis.

“Don’t you have to?” Stein asked.

“Maybe just look up the Cliffnotes version?” Sid suggested.

“Cliffnotes?” Azusa looked over at him like he was insane. “Of an **exorcism**?”

“I’ll just skip to the end,” Nygus declared, scrolling down on her phone.

“Whoa, whoa, _wait_, can you do that?!” Spirit asked, somewhat frantically.

She ignored him, dropping her voice low. “Okay. In minister of Christ and the church in the name of Jesus I command you, unclean spirit, if you lie and hide in the body of Spirit Albarn, created by God, in any way, that you immediately give us the manifestation, show us the sign! In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit I compel you to leave!” She raised her voice in emphasis. “This! **BODY?**”

Silence. Everyone peered at Spirit intently, and Spirit squirmed in his seat uncomfortably.

“I think you’re good then,” Nygus finally said, nodding her approval.

"Oh thank god," Spirit managed.

“The hell are you doing?” A voice roared from below the floor.

Spirit nearly jumped out of his chair, Marie shrieked, and Sid stumbled back and fell flat on his ass with a loud yelp.

“Jesus christ,” Azusa gasped, face chalk-white.

“Neighbors,” Spirit managed. “Uh... sorry Free!” He raised his voice. “Did we wake you up?!”

“Yeah asshole, you did!” A feminine voice yelled, and Spirit cringed. Eruka. Great. “The hell are you doing up there?! It sounds like a goddamn exorcism!”

“It was,” Stein called back.
“Stein!” Spirit hissed.

“What? It was.”

“Wait- it was?!” Eruka sounded horrified.

“Sorry!” Spirit yelled back. “We’ll uh, be quiet. No more exorcisms, I promise.”

“What the actual fuck-”

“Look, we have been hearing some weird crap going on up there!” Free’s voice yelled. “We’ve heard people getting punched in the face, we’ve heard you screaming like you were getting murdered, we’ve heard some really, really weird arguments that probably make sense in context, but we are drawing the line at exorcisms, man!”

“Good to know!” Spirit replied. “It won’t happen again, we swear!”

“Better not!” Was Eruka’s final reply before everything went silent.

“Good job, Nygus,” Sid said after a pause. “You pissed off the neighbors.”

“Can we all go to bed now?” Spirit pleaded. “Before someone calls the police thinking that we’re a satanic cult or something?”

“Fine.” Nygus looked a little put out. “I thought it was fun, though.”

“It kinda was!” Marie was smiling ear-to-ear. “In a scary way.”

“I told you nothing would happen,” Stein added.

“I’m pretty sure I’m actually possessed at this point,” Spirit grumbled, before standing. “Come on Maka, we’re going to bed.”

“I wanna try though,” Maka whined.

“No,” Spirit said firmly, taking her hand. “Good night everyone, this was great and all, but if I wake up screaming again, you’ll know why.”

“Hey at least we know you’re not an evil spirit,” He heard Sid say smugly as he led Maka back towards their room.

“Why do you keep making that joke, oh my god-” Was Azusa's irritated response.

Spirit made sure to arrive early on the first day of his internship, noting that so far it didn’t seem as though he was possessed. Nobody had seen him floating unconscious over his bed or crawling upside down like a spider around the apartment, and he hadn’t puked up any weird green slime so he figured he was fine.

At the moment, at least.

When he was led into what he assumed was Shinigami’s office, he found a guy about his age sitting at the large glass desk in the largely black-and-white office. The guy’s head jerked up as Spirit walked in, and his eyes narrowed-eyes that were red, what the fuck?

“Mr. Morton will be here soon,” The man who’d let him said, before closing the glass door and
leaving Spirit to his own devices with the creepy red-eyed guy.

Who had not once stopped staring at him.

“Hey there,” Spirit said, attempting to be friendly.

The guy just kept staring at him. It wasn’t just his eyes that were weird-his hair was dyed with jagged red and white streaks over black, and he wore what looked like a red and black striped suit with exaggerated, padded shoulders.

*Holy shit,* Spirit thought dumbfoundedly. *I’d never thought I’d see anything like this outside of Stein’s emo phase.*

“You an intern here too?” Spirit tried.

“No,” The guy said abruptly, in the flattest tone Spirit had ever heard in his life.

“Oh...uh, alright.” Spirit awkwardly took a seat in front of the desk. “You work for Shin-uh, Mr. Morton then?”

“No.” That came out a bit more harshly than before.

Spirit nodded, slowly, waiting to see if the man would elaborate.

He didn’t. Just kept staring at him.

“Alright.” *Good talk.*

Thankfully, Shinigami came striding in seconds later, looking as cheerful and bouncy as always, with the same black coat billowing behind him.

“Spirit!” He greeted. “Long time no see!”

“Hey!” Spirit stood to shake Shinigami’s offered hand.

“First things first-I told you I’d keep you updated on the issue of Crona. I know I’ve missed your calls about him, and I apologize for that.”

“It’s alright, I know you’re busy.” Maka was going to be excited. “What’s going on?”

“Well-” Shinigami stopped himself short once he finally noticed the man at his desk and suddenly all trace of cheer vanished instantly, smile disappearing and eyes going cold. “What are you doing here?”

The guy at the desk just shrugged. “I got bored babysitting the brats.”

“You-” Shinigami’s eyes narrowed. “Did you leave them alone?”

“Relax,” The guy drawled out, shuttling his laptop. “They’re with Eibon.”

“Out.” Shinigami growled, pointing to the door. “And give that to me.”

The guy just shrugged, getting to his feet and sweeping out of the office, passing off his laptop to Shinigami as he went. His shoulder collided into Spirit’s as he went, the impact surprisingly forceful and strong enough to cause Spirit to stumble backwards.
The hell did I do? Spirit stared at the retreating coattails as the strode through the door and slammed it behind him, not sure whether to be taken aback or irritated. “What’s with him?”

Shinigami just sighed. “I wish I knew.”

“Who is he?” Spirit settled back into his chair, watching as Shinigami headed towards his desk.

“My eldest.” Shinigami sounded almost apologetic as he sat down to face Spirit.

“Wait—that’s Asura?”

“Yes it is.”

Spirit wasn’t really sure what he expected, but that guy was still ten times weirder than expected. He knew Asura would probably turn out to be an asshole, having had to rescued his five-year-old brother after he apparently abandoned him in the streets. But he had no idea he was so...well, creepy. Extremely, extremely fucking creepy. Something about him gave him the chills, something other than the bizarre red eyes and the way he just stared at him. Though he wasn’t sure why.

“I know he’s a bit...much,” Shinigami continued. “But don’t worry about him.”

“Alright.” Spirit wasn’t completely convinced, but he decided to move on from the topic. “So Crona?”

“Right!” Suddenly all cheer again, Shinigami clapped his hands together before weaving around his desk, and plopping down in the swivel chair. “His mother hasn’t been found yet. I’ve been informed that there is evidence of her leaving her home, and authorities are currently trying to find her. In the meantime however, he’s been staying with me. I’m strongly considering making that arrangement permanent.”

Spirit’s eyes widened. “You’re adopting him? Really?”

“Yep!”

“That’s awesome!” Spirit almost couldn’t believe it. Now the poor kid would have a chance to be happier, and damn if he didn’t love it when stories had a happy ending.

Shinigami shrugged. “Well, he fits in pretty well. We’ve all grown kinda fond of him-Kid especially. I’d be genuinely sad to see him go. Hence I’ve been thinking about making sure he won’t have to.”

“That’s incredible. Maka’ll be so happy when I tell her.”

“He’s been asking about her quite a bit. So have the rest of my kids, honestly. Kid won’t stop talking about her. We really should get them together at some point.”

“For sure,” Spirit agreed. “She like that.”

“Well, I suppose we should get started then.” Shinigami rolled over to a nearby filing cabinet. “I thought I’d start you off with the basics-filing papers, answering emails, so on and so forth.”

“Sounds good.”

“Excellent.” Large hands pulled the cabinet drawers open, and began to pull out one stack of papers. And then another.
And then another.

And then another.

Spirit’s motivation wavered, then dropped dramatically as Shinigami seemingly cleared out the entirety of his filing cabinet on the table in front of him.

“There!” After what seemed like forever, Shinigami spread his hands out in front of him. “File these!”

That was an incredibly vague instruction. “File these? That’s it?”

“Yup!”

“What do you mean file these?”

Shinigami blinked. “I mean you file these.”

“Okay. How do you want them filed? Color, name, type of font, level of readability?”

“I’ll leave that up to you.” Shinigami gestured at him. “But don’t make a mess of it, okay? These are my personal documents.”

Spirit swallowed. He really, really hoped that wasn’t a veiled threat. “Alright. Cool. Should I file them back into the cabinet then?”

“Nope. I plan to get rid of it as soon as I can. It doesn’t match the rest of the room’s decor. Don’t you think?”

“It looks fine to me.”

“Trust me.”

“Alright.” Spirit wasn’t going to question it. “Is there another cabinet you want me to use then?”

“Why would you need another cabinet?”

“...well, that’s the whole point of a filing cabinet. To file papers. Which is what you want me to do. Right?”

“Speaking of things I want you do to!” Shinigami slid Asura’s laptop across the desk towards Spirit. “My work inbox has gotten pretty cluttered, would you mind going through and deleting all the stuff I don’t need?”

“Isn’t that your son’s laptop?” Spirit asked faintly.

Shinigami scowled. “No, it’s one of the company’s. I took his away a long time ago.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll log into my email for you when you’re ready, and while we’re there, I’ll give you a rundown on all the projects and other companies we’re handling at the moment. That should help you for future tasks.”

“Okay.” Spirit took the laptop, and set it next to the papers. “Anything else?”
“Oh yes!” Shinigami snapped his fingers. “Before you do all that, would you mind bringing me my coffee?”

Spirit tried not to sigh. “Not at all. How do you take it?”

“Two teaspoons of sugar and two teaspoons of cinnamon, however, you have to alternate between the two, with of teaspoon of sugar then one of cinnamon, and so on and so forth. Whipped cream of top as well, with a drizzle of both chocolate and caramel on top, preferably in a spiral shape. The coffee itself should be the hazelnut blend. Got it?”

Wow. “I think so?”

“Great!” Shinigami shooed him out. “Now please try to be quiet for the next hour or so, I need to make some calls.”

“Will do.” Already beginning to forget the entire coffee order, Spirit left before he realized he had no idea where he was supposed to get the coffee.

In a miraculous twist of fate, however, he had managed to not completely screw up the coffee. Or at least, Shinigami had drank it without complaint.

Two hours into “filing” (aka just sorting the papers in piles by date because he wasn’t sure what else to do) and Spirit’s head was beginning to throb. To take a break, he reached for the laptop and glanced over at Shinigami, who was still on the phone. When Shinigami glanced up at him and noticed, he held up a finger and mouthed “one minute.”

“Take your time,” Spirit mouthed back. Shinigami nodded in response and went back to his conversation. Spirit went ahead and opened the laptop, thinking that maybe he’d have some time to web browse or something-anything other than filing.

To his surprise, as soon as he booted up the computer, there was an email account already open onscreen.

Spirit glanced up at Shinigami questioningly, but the other man had his phone in the crook of his neck and was typing furiously at the computer on his desk. He glanced back at the screen, thinking maybe he should log out just quickly before Shinigami did notice.

Then something caught his eye-more specifically, the subject line from one email.

Re: Re: some pics to brighten your day love ;)

-@arachnegorgon.user.net

It took a moment to place where he’d heard the name Arachne Gorgon before, but he finally remembered it from Azusa and Shinigami’s conversation from the Fourth of July, specifically how the name was spoke with a certain amount of contempt.

But it seemed as though something a bit more risque was going on between her and Shinigami’s son. Unless the subject line was way more innocent than what it looked like.

Oh god. The gravity of what he might have just discovered was beginning to sink in. Unless Shinigami knew about this- it would definitely explain the amount of tension between him and his son—but at the same time something told Spirit this was not the case.
The temptation to take a peek to see if that was really what it looked like was strong, but Spirit restrained himself. He was just going to click out, pretend he never saw it. Simple.

Then, suddenly, a new message popped up. New, unread, and with a subject line that immediately caught Spirit’s attention.

**Receipts (delete asap)**

-@arachnegorgon.user.net

A prickle of unease made his spine tingle. Something about that seemed...ominous.

Not just ominous, incredibly sketchy. Receipts for what? For a business deal, maybe? Was Asura even working in the company? He’d gotten the impression earlier that he wasn’t, but Spirit couldn’t say that for sure.

Conflicted, he let his fingers drag the cursor over towards the unopened email, ready to click. At the same time, a voice in the back of his head was screaming desperately about what was doing—which was going through someone else’s email without their knowledge. Which felt horribly creepy and wrong and weird, and he knew he really should log out immediately.

But at the same time, *something* about Asura had given him a bad vibe, even though he wasn’t completely sure what it was (other than the fact he was just creepy).

*Fuck it. Hopefully it’s nothing. If it is, I can just say the idiot left his email open for anyone to see and it’d be true.*

Spirit clicked on the email. The second it took to load stretched for a horribly long amount of time, too long almost.

Finally, a series of screenshots appeared.

It took a minute to comprehend what he was seeing—obviously, it was a series of account statements—but then it suddenly dawned on his the gravity of what he was seeing.

Money transfers. A lot of them. From Morton’s to Arachne Gorgon’s personal account.

*Oh, holy shit.*

Spirit stared speechlessly at the screen in front of him. That couldn’t be legal. Right? Either way, Shinigami probably didn’t know about this.

*Not good. Definitely not good.*

“...thank you.” Shinigami was saying, wrapping up his call. “Yes, good luck! Good bye.”

“Shinigami?” Spirit blurted out the minute Shinigami hung up.

“Yes?” Shinigami blinked up at him. “What’s the matter- oh, am I already logged in?”

“Uh- no...” Spirit was...not quite sure how to break this to him. “Okay. Um. Have you been...lending money out to people? Anyone at all?”

“No.” The answer was immediate, confused. “Why?”

“Nobody? Do you ever use company funds to lend money to people, by any chance?”
“Of course not!” Shinigami’s eyes narrowed. “What exactly brought this on?”

Spirit wordlessly turned the laptop around towards Shinigami.

He’d expected Shinigami to be upset. Angry too, probably.

But Shinigami had somehow taken it even worse than he expected, and the aftermath was not pretty.

Spirit was supposed to have gone home two hours ago. He had texted Blair to just drop Maka off at the apartment if Sid or Nygus or Azusa were there, and he’d just gotten a text that she had, that Maka was home, as well as a picture of her striking a pose in one of Blair’s too-big dresses, with too-big heels on her feet, and her face done up with makeup from what had to be Blair’s personal makeup kit.

Despite the chaos happening, Spirit couldn’t help but smile. At least Maka was having fun while he was here.

He wasn’t even really doing anything. He’d already been questioned, four times in fact, only once by the police and the rest by Shinigami, who had then called the police. He was sitting outside of Shinigami’s office, trying not to listen in on the loud, angry, possibly violent argument that was going on inside.

“YOU UNGRATEFUL LITTLE BASTARD-” Shinigami’s voice was loud enough to be heard from the deepest pits of hell, a far, far cry from his usual self. “AFTER ALL I’VE DONE FOR YOU!”

He probably shouldn’t be here, listening to what was happening. Actually, he really shouldn’t be here listening to what was happening. This was family drama in its purest form, and none of it was his business, but he was the reason it was happening in the first place, so he wanted to see it through to the end.

“Excuse me? Are you the new intern?”

Spirit jumped a bit at the new voice, before blinking up at a very tall, bespectacled man peering down at him. He had a long, floor-length coat that was heavy with golden embroidery, and a thick binder stuffed to the brim with papers tucked under his arm.

Standing at his side were the three kids Spirit felt as though he should recognize plenty well by now.

“Hoi!” Patty gave him an enthusiastic wave.

Kid gave him a much more solemn, more restrained wave.

“That is him,” Liz said helpfully.

“What she said,” Spirit said. “Who’s asking?”

“Call me Eibon.” The man stuck out his hand, which Spirit took for a handshake. “I’m Shinigami’s Head of Resources.”

“Oh, okay. I’m Spirit.”

“Nice to meet you Spirit.” Eibon pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Will you be here for a while?”
“Yeah, probably until-”

“YOU LITTLE BRAT-”

Liz and Patty visibly jumped, Kid’s eyes went wide. Spirit bit his lower lip as Shinigami raged at his older son in the other room.

“THIS IS THE LAST TIME YOU’LL SCREW ME OVER! YOU CAN ROT IN PRISON FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE YOU UNGRATEFUL BASTARD!”

Holy shit. Spirit thought he heard a faint, muffled sob, but he wasn’t sure who it belonged to. Either way, it felt as though all he could do was sit in stunned silence.

Was he really listening to the same Shinigami who doted on his three younger kids? Who got him his internship, who offered to give up his spot during the fireworks for group of college kids he had just met? The cheerful, almost unflappable Shinigami that he was starting to get used to?

“Well,” Eibon said awkwardly, cutting through the tension like a knife. “I apologize for any intrusion, but I’ve been told a lot about you, enough that I think I can leave these kids with you in good conscience.”

“Oh, uh-”

“I’ve been watching them all day,” Eibon added, somewhat desperately. “Literally all day. Please. I have a wife that’ll skin me alive if I don’t return home soon, and work I still need to finish. It’ll just be until Shinigami can take them home.”

Spirit sighed. “Sure. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you.” Eibon took a step back, placing an arm around and pulling a fourth child off from behind his leg. “Come on now, Crona.”

Even if the kid’s name hadn’t been said, Spirit would have recognized those wide, Eeyore-eyes anywhere. And that was right-Crona was staying with Shinigami now. “Crona! How are you doing, kid?”

Crona blinked up at him wide-eyed, like a deer in the headlights before relaxing, slightly. “You’re...Maka’s dad. I remember.”

“That’s right.” Spirit gave Crona a smile, inching forward in his seat to place himself level with the kid. “She misses you a lot. We’ll have to find a way to get you two together some time.”

Crona immediately brightened at that. “She’s-not mad at me?”

“Of course not. Why would she be mad at you?”

“I ruined the fireworks.” Crona drooped a little at that.

“Nah, you didn’t. You definitely didn’t.” Spirit gave him a reassuring smile. “Okay?”

“Okay...” Crona looked a bit hesitant.

“Well, I should leave now.” Eibon gave Spirit a nod, eyes flickering to the closed door, where the sounds from within had gone quiet. “Thank you again, Spirit. Bye kids.”

“No problem,” Spirit called after him, but Eibon had turned heel around the corner so fast Spirit
was unsure whether he’d heard him.

“Alright.” Spirit glanced down at four equally somber-looking faces.

“What’s happening with Asura?” Liz asked softly.

Spirit swallowed. Oh boy. “You...might want to ask your dad that, Liz.” Liz visibly drooped, and he decided that he probably should take these kids away from where their brother was getting interrogated by the police. Maybe even try to cheer them up a bit too. “How about we go down to the lobby? I think there are some magazines there we can look at.”

Kid glanced over at Liz and Patty, the latter giving a shrug, then glanced over at Crona.

“You okay with that Crona?” Kid asked.

Crona shifted his shoulders a bit. “Uh. I don’t know.”

“C’mon,” Spirit encouraged. “I bet there’s some old newspaper we can rip up and fold up. Do you guys know what origami is?”

That seemed to pique their interests, especially Patty, who visibly brightened.

“Can we make giraffes?” Patty asked eagerly.

“Whatever you want,” Spirit assured her.

“Okay!” Patty bounded forward, immediately being trailed by Liz, then Kid, with Crona shuffling reluctantly behind them.

It turned out to be a semi-successful idea-Patty got pretty absorbed with making a small army of tiny giraffes, Liz even watched over her as she did, but both she and Kid looked grim, even borderline upset. Spirit tried to dodge their questions as best as he could, figuring it wasn’t his place to talk about what was happening with Asura. This was one of the reasons he was relieved when the elevator dinged and Shinigami stepped out of it, finally, finally there.

Spirit had been bracing for a tense, angry Shinigami, building up a picture to fit the rage-filled tirade he had heard earlier, but instead he just looked exhausted. All traces of the anger were gone, to the point where Spirit almost wondered if he was the same man he had heard behind those closed doors after all.

But the tired look was immediately muted as soon Shinigami had reached them, turning into something considerably more flat as soon as he got to his kids, not quite expressionless, but something decidedly more neutral.

“Spirit, I didn’t think you’d still be here,” He said evenly, as if he hadn’t just been screaming at his son to rot in jail.

“Just wanted to make sure everything was sorted out,” Spirit replied, warily.

“Where’s Asura?” Kid asked.

“I’m afraid he got in trouble, Kid.” That was possibly the biggest understatement Spirit had heard in a long time. “Did Spirit tell you what happened?”

“He said you would.”
Shinigami glanced over at Spirit, and Spirit recognized a brief, somewhat thankful look. “I will when we get home. Thanks for sticking around Spirit.”

“No problem.” Spirit wasn’t sure how else to reply. “I hope everything turns out okay.”

For a brief second, the tiredness was back before Shinigami gave a stiff nod. “I’ll call you a cab.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I insist.” Shinigami inclined his head a bit, and on cue, Liz, Patty, and Kid all stood, with Crona following a second later. “You shouldn’t walk alone during this hour.”

“I’ll be fine, it isn’t even a bad neighborhood.”

“I insist,” Shinigami repeated, already turning heel and heading away briskly, the kids scrambling behind him to keep up. “It should pick you up in the front in about ten minutes. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” Was all he felt he could say before Shinigami disappeared around the corner. Patty gave him a small wave before the entire family had left him in the dust.

After his first day at Morton’s, Spirit didn’t think things could get any more chaotic.

Dead wrong.

The first sign of this was coming across what he recognized to be Azusa’s car in front of his apartment building after the cab had dropped him off. That in itself wasn’t alarming—it was the fact that it looked like a giant boulder had dropped on top of it. The hood was completely caved in, the pristine white paint had been scratched beyond repair, and the thing looked as though it would never drive again.

Holy shit.

As soon as he ran inside, praying that whatever happened was nothing and that everyone was okay, he could hear the screaming before he even opened the door.

“-MOTHERFUCKER!”

To his utter shock, Azusa was struggling against Marie and Nygus’ holds. All of the composure Spirit knew her for was lost—she looked as though she was ready to strangle Stein, who was sitting across from her with narrowed eyes, a cigarette in his mouth, legs crossed, and covered in soot.

“What’s going on?” Spirit managed to call out over Azusa’s long string of curses.

“Azusa’s upset that I crashed her car,” Stein responded.

“Wait— that was you?!?”

“He crashed it on purpose!” Azusa snarled. “He crashed it on purpose because I threw away his stupid animal parts—”

“What happened?!” Spirit demanded, glancing over at Marie and Nygus.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Nygus responded irritably. “Godfather over there got Azusa back for throwing out his creepy experiments by crashing the hundred-thousand dollar car her father
bought for her."

Stein only let out a trail of smoke blow out of his mouth coolly. “It was an accident.”

“You-” Azusa lunged forward again, straining against and trying to claw her way out of Marie and Nygus’ holds like a feral cat.

“Wait, why did you crash Azusa’s car?” Spirit demanded.

“Well,” Stein drawled. "If there were any reason that I would purposefully crash Azusa's car, it would be because she walked into mine and Marie’s room, our room, took the samples of roadkill I’ve been working with for months, and tossed them in the garbage without permission."

“I was sick of the smell!” Azusa snapped. “I could smell all your stupid animal corpses all the way from my room! I don’t even know how Marie handles it! And I did tell you, I told you over and over that you need to keep your experiments in a manner that doesn’t affect any of us! I complained about the smell, over and over, and you ignored me!”

“Do you know how long I’d been working on that experiment?” Stein snapped. “When I say months, I actually mean months. I have dedicated hours and hours of time and research into that experiment, and you threw it all away like it was nothing!”

“That’s no excuse for crashing my car!”

“Did this all happen today?” Spirit asked incredulously.

“We got this handled,” Marie told Spirit quickly. “It’s fine. You should check on Maka.”

Spirit didn’t believe her. “Are you sure?”

“Yes I’m fine,” Azusa said through gritted teeth. “I’m fine, so you can let me go now.”

“Oh please, the minute we let go you’re going to strangle him,” Nygus hissed.

Stein scoffed. “I doubt she can manage it.”

“Try me,” Azusa hissed.

“Everything’s fine,” Marie said vehemently. “We’re just going to let them both calm down. Check on Maka.”

“Is she still awake?” Spirit demanded. It was one in the morning by now, if they had kept Maka up-

“Yes,” came a small voice from the direction of the hallway. Maka was watching them tiredly, wrapped in the blanket from Spirit’s bed.

“Okay, we’re going to bed.” Spirit headed angrily towards Maka to pick her up. “It’s time for bed.” He sent a glare at Azusa, then Stein. “And I swear to god, if she gets woken up because of whatever stupid argument you two are having-”

“Stupid argument?” Azusa snarled. “My car-”

“It’s one in the morning!” Spirit felt Maka’s head lean against his hip—she could barely stay awake, for god’s sake. “Look, we’re all tired, which I guess is my fault, so can we just wait until morning to sue him or whatever you want to do to him. He probably deserves it. Can you all just
shut up so that my daughter could go to sleep?!”

“He’s right,” Marie pleaded. “Let’s just cool off, okay?”

He didn’t wait for another response. He tugged Maka gently towards their room. “Come on kiddo, let’s get you to bed.”

“Okay,” Maka mumbled. “I hope Azusa and Stein are quiet now.”

“Me too.”

What a fucking day.

At least he got to tuck Maka in at the end of it, even if he could still heard muffled arguing from down the hall.

Stein was seriously going to be the death of him.

Actually, no. At this rate, everyone in his goddamn apartment was going to give him premature gray hairs.

TO BE CONTINUED

Chapter End Notes

Sooo, at some point I decided "fuck it," and made Leap Year into a series. A three-part series to be exact, because there are fifteen chapters and the temptation of having exactly five chapters per part was too much to resist.

Thank you to those who left comments and kudos, and I hope you all stick around until this monster is finished. ^^

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!