Bloody, Retrograde Prequel Vignettes

by SumDumMuffin

Summary

A love story between two unrepentant murderers: Flandre and Koishi fall in love, over and over, as Koishi is unable to be remembered.


Notes

I do not own Touhou; Team Shanghai Alice does. This is a derivative work of Touhou Project. It contains scenarios which differ considerably from the original work, and should not be taken as an accurate depiction of its characters or setting. Please proceed with caution if you wish to preserve your image of the original works. If you dislike such fanworks, please do not continue.

I guarantee no expertise in or even rudimentary knowledge of Buddhist mythological creatures, romance, vampires, vampire romance, relationships, math, space-time, religion, or immortality.
The Lake, the first time

The first time they met was at the lake outside Scarlet Devil Mansion.

There sat a girl with pale green hair and striking green eyes, wearing a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow and a tan dress with wide sleeves. She had a third eyeball, just flopping around, and it was stitched shut, horribly, haphazardly. She sat on a hill next to the lake, overlooking the reflection of the moon upon its ethereal waters, and she cried, softly but unmistakably. Occasionally a fairy would flutter over only to be vaporized with an offhand flick of a wrist.

Then, a blond girl, with a white and red dress and with Christmas-light wings pranced though the forest. She stopped when she noticed the girl, and she cautiously hovered over to her.

“What's wrong?” asked the blond girl, a curious frown on her face.

The green haired girl jerked up suddenly and wiped her tears. She was surprised to see someone notice her. “Oh, it's -it's nothing,” she said, “Just some big sister problems.”

“Oh, man,” said the second one, plopping down next to the other one, “I know how you feel. My big sister is just the worst,” she began. And she continued, mentioning that just today her sister tried to ground her as she was a 'menace to the mortal world' or something.

They shared stories and doubts and chuckles and they traded names. The green girl was named Koishi, and the blond one Flandre. Flandre took Koishi by the hand and walked her around the lake, a routine that often soothed her and that she hoped would sooth her new friend.

It seemed to work, Flandre thought, but not as well as she had wanted it to. Koishi smiled the kind of smile one does to acquaintances when they give you a gift that almost, but not quite, completely misunderstands the kind of things you enjoy. Koishi's eyes didn't light up all the way, and she frequently gazed downward and occasionally let slip a melancholic sigh.

Flandre asked about the floppy eyeball. Koishi told her she was a Satori, a race of psychic mind-readers, and that Koishi had forsaken the inherent gifts of her race. Flandre confessed she herself was a daywalker. It turned out both their sisters were uncomfortable with their different powers. They griped about it, and yelled impotently to the night air, and then laughed, cathartic-ally, awkwardly, briefly, looking at the ground. This was the opposite of Flandre's intention, to cheer up her new acquaintance.

A forlorn silence loomed, and Koishi almost bid farewell, but then Flandre grabbed Koishi by the arm and jumped over the lake, hovering a meter above it. Koishi stumbled at first but held on to Flandre's arms, until she lost her balance and braced herself for the impact with the water.

It never came. Koishi tentatively opened her eyes and relaxed her face, and she looked up where Flandre was smirking, holding their feet together to keep Koishi parallel to the surface of the lake.

Koishi pulled herself up with one tug, and Flandre placed a hand on Koishi's hip, an awkward dance partner as the satori stood a good head taller than the vampire. Koishi balanced on her third eyeball so that she hovered, like the vampire did, and they danced over the water in smooth, graceful arks; arms aloft, hands always joined. They spiraled and bounced and scraped the surface of the pond in splashes sometimes elegant and sometimes playful.

At the end of their dance, Koishi pulled Flandre closer to her, and wrapped an arm around the
smaller girl's waist. She looked into Flandre's brilliant crimson eyes. Flandre adjusted Koishi's hat and brushed a lock of her own hair out of her face.

They broke into laughter. Real, honest laughter, the kind that dissipates sadness and forms memories.

“Thanks,” said Koishi, “I'm so glad I met you.”

“Awww,” Flandre stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. It accentuated the relevant fang. “I'm so glad I met you too! See you again?”


They parted ways.

This was fifty years ago.
The First Time They Fought

The second time they met was two weeks after the first.

Koishi snuck into the Scarlet Devil manor- it was easier than she would have thought, considering how it was owned by some sort of ancient vampire lord.

The outer grounds were a garden, and Koishi just walked past the groundskeeper; some tall red-haired Youkai who didn't seem too devoted to doing her job.

The front door was intricate engraved old oak, set between marble columns. When Koishi knocked on the front door, the parlor maid asked Koishi her businesses, so she did a simple mind-trick to get into the mansion itself.

And the hallways twisted into the depths of the mansion. After a few boring minutes of fruitless wandering, Koishi hunted down a maid to Ochedin Valannor in order to find where Flandre lived. It turned out to be past the grand ball room, in the basement. Or dungeon. Or non-euclidean abyss beneath the grand hallway. Same thing.

And after she then she found her quarry; Koishi pulled open the massive iron doors of Flandre's abyss. They creaked in a way that echoed through Koishi’s spine and a shaft of light illuminated a hunched figure in the depths.

Koishi looked down into the basement. The floor was lined with perfectly interlocking smooth dark stones. Every so often a twisted iron candelabra erupted from the ground. In the middle of the floor, amid gothic stuffed animals, sat Flandre, chained and hunched over her coffin, looked up, confused, though a little hopeful.

"You deceived me," said Koishi, meanacingly, "I spent an entire evening with one of the most powerful beings in Gensoukyou and I didn't even know it."

Flandre looked up and smiled from ear to ear, though not though her eyes. "If it's a fight you want, stranger," she said, tilting her head to the side. Her body went limp like a marionette and she shrugged her arms and the chains shattered into grey dust, "Then COME AT ME."

And so she did. Their fight was pretty epic; a whirl of color and power that erupted through the mansion and the surrounding areas, and maybe some innocent bystanders became carbon silhouettes upon the ground.

Koishi kept the number of outside interventions to a zero. Their fight concluded in the room it began in, at the bottom of the pit in which Flandre was imprisoned.

//-------------------------------

"That was amazing, Flandre,” said Koishi, panting heavily and bleeding from the side of her head.
“Ha, yeah,” sighed Flandre from where she sat atop the Satori's stomach. Her left arm was limp and she had a large burned gash along her midriff. “Best fight I've had in a while."

“You want to call it a draw?”

“What?” wheezed Flandre, “No way. I totally beat you, fo' sho'.”

Koishi pushed the smaller girl off her, so that they lay side by side.

“Where'd you learn to fight like that?” Koishi said. She turned her head lazily and creaked open an eye.

“I dunno,” said Flandre, "Fights with my sister? I'm a vampire,” Flandre ruffled her ornament wings, "A mutant one, so maybe it's all natural talent. Sometimes I wonder if my sister is actually related to me."

“Oh?” said Koishi. “Sometimes I wish my sister wasn't related to me.”

Flandre chuckled. “But she's my sister all the same. She's taught me a lot. Like how to be hospital to those we've defeated."

Koishi giggled. "Hospital?"

Flandre bit her lip. "Yeah, like medical treatment? I'll get a maid over. And if you want,” Flandre looked down and her cheeks tinted a bit, "I can get some tea and we can have a party with my friends?" Flandre gestured to a cabal of stuffed animals in various states of Gothic stitches.

Koishi giggled again, as much as she could without it hurting. "I'd love to."

"I don't know how you knew my name, but I'm Flandre. It's nice to meet you."

Koishi's smile faded just a modicum. "Koishi. Charmed, truly."
"Would you like some more tea, Ms. Komeiji?" said Flandre in a silly accent. She was the first to regain fine motor control.

"That would be lovely, Ms. Scarlet," Koishi replied, in an equally silly voice affectation. As far as tea went, this particular brew was about 30% honey. There was the faint taste of ginseng, which was probably what the tea was intended to be back when a nervous maid delivered it with shaking hands and incoherent squeaks before booking it up the shattered staircase.

"And how about you, Viceroy Sassypants?"

Flandre manipulated a dilapidated stuffed cat with the tip of her wing. "Oh no thanks. I'm stuffed!"

No one laughed, not even Flandre. Koishi almost did, not at the joke, but at how cute Flan was. Or maybe this was supposed to be some sort of satire?

Flandre didn't seem to mind. She turned to their third living member, some sort of humanoid Youkai (probably?). "And you, Ms. Hong?"

A tall woman with red hair scrunched her face, like she was still trying to process what was happening. Koishi had snuck past her on the way in. Snuck was a bit of a strong word, though; the redhead had been sleeping under a tree.

Ms. Meiling Hong eventually nodded and Flandre refilled her cup. She swirled the cup in her hand and stared into it.

Koishi thought she'd get along with Flandre's friend in normal circumstances (she reminded her a bit of Utsuho, just a little), but she didn't like that the groundskeeper was here, partially because even if she managed to trick the groundskeeper into leaving and forgetting all about her, Flandre would still know Meiling had been here. But mostly because, once Koishi left, Flandre would only remember having tea with her groundskeeper. Koishi had to calm herself down to ensure she didn't crush the teacup in her hand.

"So, Flan," said the groundskeeper eventually, cautiously.

"Yes, Mei-Mei?"

"It's always nice to have guests," said Meiling, "And an excuse to not work, but who the hell is this?"

"Meiling, rude!"

Koishi smiled wickedly. "No no, I'm used to it. And I did destroy a lot of the estate."

Flandre waved the air. "Eh, I do it all the time. It's no excuse to be rude Meiling!"

They bickered for a while, and Koishi became increasingly disillusioned with the tea party. Flandre kept talking to Meiling, bringing up all their in-jokes and the past adventures they had had together.

"Well, I think I'm done regenerating," said Koishi, with just a hint of coldness in her voice. "I should probably get going." She stood up, shakily at first, and made to leave.
"Wait!" Flandre said, grabbing the Satori's sleeve. "You don't like the party? Is it Sassypants? I can have her executed for the puns."

Koishi smirked in spite of herself. "You seem to be preoccupied with Ms. Hong. I wouldn't want to bring down the party."

"I just wanted you to meet my friends." Flandre tilted her head downward and looked upward at Koishi. Her lower lip jutted out in a pout and she poked her fingers together. "And to think I was cool. That's why I kept talking about the fun times Mei-Mei and I had. We could go on adventures like that too, if- if you'd like." Flandre kept her face tilted down and glanced up with her eyes. "I know I'd like that."

Koishi's expression softened. If only she dared to dream...

"Well, uh, Koishi was it?" said Meiling. She rubbed her head. "I can leave for a bit. I can see I'm a bit of a third wheel," She smiled like she was making a joke, but focused on Flandre's face, maybe to see if the vampire thought it was funny.

"Well it's up to you, Koishi," said Flandre.

Koishi frowned. It really wasn't. If Meiling came back, Flandre would wonder why she didn't remember the Satori, and that'd be suuuper awkward. She'd be putting her own selfish desires ahead of Flandre's. Maybe the vampire wouldn't like just hanging out, just the two of them.

But maybe she could indulge herself, for just this moment.

"If it's okay with you..." began Koishi.

"Yeah!" said Meiling, a little too quickly, "No problem. I mean, someone should be fixing this huge hole in the basement," she pointed upwards.

"I think of it as a sunroof. It's nice to see the sky, and it'll discourage Remi from popping down. And who knows," Flandre smirked, "Maybe I'll even get a tan."

The three of them laughed at that. Meiling bid farewell and the two older monsters continued their tea party.

Koishi need not have worried; she and Flandre enjoyed themselves just fine, especially when they immolated Viceroy Sassypants in front of the other stuffed animals, as retribution for the puns.
Koishi flew around the Palace of Earth Spirits, idly trailing her hands along the crumbling, overgrown terra-cotta statues that lined the walls. Shafts of hell-light beamed in from the holes in the walls and ceiling, and bits of rubble were left where they had fallen (or gotten blown out in a Danmaku). Growing from the ear of one particularly reverent caryatid was a single, large, brilliant red flower that blended into orange at the tips of its petals, with white and yellow anthems.

Koishi plucked the flower by its stem and pulled it to her nose. She closed the two of her eyes that could open and breathed in deeply. Smelled like sacrilege.

"Koishi," said a woman.

Koishi's smile vanished. She turned to the speaker; a petite pink-haired humanoid who had a third eyeball, just flopping around. Her third eyeball was open, albeit narrowed in suspicion, alert, focused. All three of her eyes were staring at her.

"Satori," said Koishi coldly. What a dumb name; who gets named after their species? "What do you want?"

"Where were you these last two weeks?" she said. She glared, accusingly

"None of your business." Koishi leaned her upper body to the right, to see if she had permission to leave.

Satori blocked her. "Koishi," she said, in that fake, condescendingly sweet way, "Don't be like that. I'm just worried about you."

Koishi gritted her teeth and glanced down. "No you're not. You're worried about your reputation, and whether or not I killed anyone."

"Fine. Be that way." Satori crossed her arms. "So did you kill anyone?"

"No," Koishi lied.

"Good." Satori nodded.

Koishi idly pulled her third eye into her hands. "And if I did, I wouldn't need you to clean up after me."

Satori threw her hands in the air. "You keep saying that, and I always end up having to."

Satori fumed for a moment and then relaxed. "Did you send Okuu on a trip to the bakery?"

"Yeah," Koishi said.

"And did you have Rin dig up a corpse for you?"

"...Yeah?"

"Why?"

Koishi stuck out her tongue and closed one of her remaining eyes. "It's a secret."
"Koishi!" shouted Satori. She put her fists on her hips.

Koishi's playful demeanor faded. "Seriously? Why do you need to know?"

"Because I need to know if its going to be a problem."

Koishi forced herself to be calm. "It's not. Now can I go?"

Satori had the biggest frown but she nodded, so Koishi leaped away.

Koishi afterwards caught up with the other two people who were capable of remembering her. She had actually known Rin and Utsuho for longer than Satori did, though in a much less intimate way than her sister came to know the two of them. This was before she blinded her third eye; Rin and Utsuho were children, once, and Koishi was their playmate. And now they're all grown up. Theoretically.

"Hey!" said a tall woman with black wings and a nuclear reactor and a dopey smile on her face. "I got you the cookies you wanted."

Koishi smiled. "Thanks Okuu!" 'Okuu' was a lot easier to pronounce than 'Utsuho'.

"Heh, you should check to see that she didn't eat any on the way here," said a red-haired, two-tailed girl. She was sitting on a ledge, leaned over her knee, smoking a long pipe. She idly tossed a golden object to Koishi, who caught it and inspected it. A dragonfly hairclip, still in usual condition. The corpse Rin plucked it off of must have been fresh. Or at least well-preserved. Koishi realized she didn't know a lot about decomposition.

"Rin!" said the hell-raven. "I wouldn't do that to Koishi! I bought my own box of cookies for myself." She reached for her pouch and grabbed at an empty bag.

"Oh, this box?" said Rin, hefting a decorative tin. It clanged when she shook it.

"Rin that's mine!" whined Utsuho. She jumped on the death cat and they wrestled, Rin cackling wickedly all the while. Koishi smiled; she was familiar with that type of wrestling. Utusho eventually had the smaller girl pinned, and they agreed to share the cookies, though Koishi had since left for her own room.

Koishi grabbed a cardboard box and arranged the flower, bag of cookies, and golden hairclip inside. She wrote a note, then frowned and crumpled it up, leaving the objects all to themselves. She closed and taped the box and addressed it to the Scarlet Devil Mansion, and drew a heart next to the name of the recipient; Flandre Scarlet.
Parts of the Scarlet Devil mansion's old Gothic architecture lay in shambles. Maids of various species tallied hard hats and masonry equipment and examined their contracts for any construction work clauses.

Hong Meiling walked around some mahogany timber, examining some packages in her arms. A wizard in pink pajamas sat and read at a small ornate tea table, placed amid the wreckage and construction supplies. She sipped tea with shaky hands, and every so often a maid would refill the tea so they could procrastinate on rebuilding the mansion.

"So we got some mail," said Meiling, sitting down at the tea table.

"Oh, uh," spoke the wizard. She covered a yawn with a sleeve too long for her arm. "Anything for me?"

"I think I saw your name here- Huh, looks like Flan got some mail."

"Some mail for me?" said Flandre.

"Flandre!" Meiling jumped up. "You're not supposed to be out of your basement!"

Flandre put her hands behind her back and swiveled on her heels. "Weww, I figuwed since the viewing was gone, that the whowe wowwd was the basement," she lisped.

Meiling's expression flattened. The wizard face-palmed.

"So what'd I get? Bilis? Secret admirer? Tribute from the pitiful human villagers in hopes that they'll be spared from my wrath?"

"Hold your horses," said Meiling. She turned to the pile of mail, and it took a moment for her to register that it was gone.

"Hehehehe," Flandre said from atop a pile of bricks. "Ooooh, look's like Patchi's comics came in; Witch's love brew volume 4."

A blast of pink light narrowly missed Flandre's face, preventing her from finishing her sentence with anything but a wicked cackle.

Flandre led Meiling on a good-spirited chase (Patchouli ran out of breath after a very, very brief jog) before returning to the tea table and handing the other humanoids their mail.

"So what'd you get?" spoke Patchouli, after she pocketed her magazine.

Flandre looked quizzical. She rummaged through the tin. "I don't know, some sort of hair pin- AND COOKIES! YAY!"

Flandre tore open the tin with her claws and threw a few of the sweets into her mouth.

"Mmmgh, these are really good," she said between bites, "You guys want some?"

"Sure," said Meiling.

"Oh, I meant that rhetorically," said Flandre through a giggle. Meiling frowned, but Patchouli
thought it was funny.

"So who sent them?" said Meiling.

"I don't know, there's no return address," said Flandre.

Flandre stared into the box for a moment, eventually picking up the flower, still pristine. Patchouli would eventually mention that it had an enchantment on it to forestall decay for at least a little while, but for now, Flandre put the still fresh flower in her hair, opposite the hair pin. She tilted her head experimentally and looked around for a reflective surface.

"Well, looks like that supports the 'secret admirer' option," spoke Patchouli. She ruffled her magazine like she was avoiding the temptation to read it immediately.

Flandre tried to contain her blush. "Nah, it's definitely fearful villagers. It's not gonna work though." She grabbed a silver tray to check how the hairpin looked, idly throwing the last teacup high over her shoulder (in the distance, a maid yelped). Flandre couldn't help but smile at the idea of a secret admirer.

"So you know how I fought someone when I blew up the mansion? I think this is the person I fought with."

"Yeah?" said Meiling, "So why don't you remember her?"

"I don't know, maybe I hit my head."

"So does that mean you lost?" spoke Patchouli from behind her magazine, a hint of a smirk on her face.

"No way, I'm too strong. And I'm still alive, right? (Well, undead. Psuedo-undead.)"

"So-" began Meiling.

"So I'm going to find out who sent this package. There's gotta be some way, right?"

"And what'll you do then?" Meiling crossed her arms.

"I'll have to send a return package. With equally delicious treats. And maybe you'll let me pick one of the blood flowers?" Flandre jutted out her lower lip.

Meiling sighed. "Fine, but only if you can find exactly who we're sending it to."

Patchouli closed her magazine and looked around. "Uh, I might be able to do some magic on it. And maybe Remilia has some contacts in the post office."

"Ok!" Flandre left the table in a blur. She flew around until she found who she was looking for in the shadow of a partially destroyed stained glass window. It was a vampire; almost as short and youthful as herself, but with a much more imperious demeanor. She had blue hair and wore a pink evening dress, and she held a black umbrella over her head against the shafts of colored light.

Flandre landed, stretching her arms in the sunlight (she couldn't resist rubbing her immunity to sunlight in her sister's face.)

"Hey, sis," said Flandre, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "So-"

"Flandre," said the vampire lord with enough finality that Flandre didn't finish her sentence.
Remilia clapped her hands and two maids procured a small ornate tea table and some chairs. Remilia sat down, and bid Flandre do the same.

Flandre crossed her arms and frowned and remained standing. Remilia shrugged.

"So what happened?" said the older sister.

"I think I can figure out who I fought with that night-"

"That's your story? You fought with someone?" Remilia clapped her hands and a maid brought her some tea.

Flandre looked at her feet. "Y-yeah, I told you-"

"So who did you fight with?"

"I don't know." Flandre kicked the ground.

"You don't know?" Remilia said, her tone dripping with sadistic amusement.

Flandre balled her hands. "That's what I said."

"No need for that tone of voice, Sis."

Flandre forced herself to take a breath. She tried to keep her voice steady. "It's what happened."

"Flan, it's OK if you had one of your episodes-" Remilia's voice sounded like it had concern in it, which only made Flandre more angry.

"I didn't! This time I really didn't-"

"Flandre, there's no sense keeping up this charade."

"You don't believe me?" Flandre grited her teeth.

"Flan, that's enough of this," snapped Remilia, "You need to learn to take responsibility for your actions."

"OK, but first I need to know how the mail system works-"

"Don't obfuscate the issue, Flandre. I am trying to teach you how to be an adult."

"I just need-

"Mistakes happen to us all," Remilia began to lecture, "but if we can't admit them-"

"WILL YOU LISTEN TO ME FOR ONCE?"

Some nearby birds flew away. A nearby maid flinched, but Remilia just closed her eyes and sighed. Silence settled in in the aftermath of Flandre's outburst, and Remilia took an excruciatingly long sip of tea before she responded.

"Flandre, I can't talk to you if you're going to be like that."

Flandre screamed and flew away. Remilia didn't chase after her. She found a secluded piece of rubble and took a seat against the twisted bars of a window.
She looked at her reflection in a large piece of shattered glass. The flower really did look nice (the hairpin was a little gaudy, though). She stroked its petals idly and found that it cheered her up, a little.
Two humanoid women sat at a small table in a large room in the Scarlet Devil Mansion. The room was empty, and though it had windows, the curtains were drawn, allowing in two or three rays that illuminated floating specs of dust and provided just enough light to see by. Not that the inhabitants relied on the visible spectrum of light to perceive their surroundings.

There was a tea set, and the two drank their respective cups. The satori seasoned her tea with the usual fare; honey and milk and spice. The vampire seasoned her tea with blood, from an elegant glass vial.

The mansion hadn't been completely rebuilt in the past few months, but enough of the visible mansion was rebuilt to its old eldritch perfection to be useable. (Actually, venturing deep into the labyrinthine could turn up unrebuilt wreckage from centuries ago, from forgotten battles and ancient, dark happenings.)

"I don't know, Satori," said the blue-haired woman, looking onto the tea cup she swirled in her hand, "You know I'm not currently tied down. Or doing the tying down, aha."

"Well," replied the pink haired woman. She attempted to make eye contact. "You could probably meet someone there. I'm sure there's no shortage of people who'd jump at the chance to date someone as amazing as you."

Remilia was unfazed by the compliment. "But would the feeling be mutual? I doubt some freshfaced wide-eyed yokai who just stumbled upon the scene would interest me," she replied, "And I've always thought that method was a little artificial. Might as well post a flier in the classifieds. Bluh." Remilia stuck her tongue out facetiously. She sipped her tea.

"You think so?" Satori turned a crumpet around in her hand suspiciously. "You have to start somewhere. And we could help you, even, if you'd like."

"You want me to just ask someone to fall in love with me, Satori?" Remilia raised her voice, but not enough to sound menacing. Perhaps a bit later. "Love can't be forced."

"But it can be found. Or discovered? You know what I mean." Satori waved the air. "Yes, love takes hard work and time, but you first have to find someone before you can put in the hard work and time. And it'd be easy to find someone there."

Remilia tilted her head forward and flattened her expression. "So you're saying I could just fall in love with anyone? That the wondrous blossoms of eternal romance are common enough that I could grow them with a random stranger I found on the street?"

"Honestly, yeah, if you put in the time and stuff," Satori shrugged, "I think anyone can learn to be compatible with each other."
"That's one way in which our differences are irreconcilable, I suppose." Remilia refilled her tea and stared into her cup, "I still cling to the silly ideas of Petrarchist romance. Of a meet-cute at the agora or something."

Satori chuckled. "And then hoping they have the same fetish as you? Good luck with that." Satori shrugged and waved her hand in between them, as if to swat the conversation out of the air. "So you're a hopeless romantic, alright. You could just go for the sex."

Remilia laughed. "After two centuries of unbounded hedonism, I found I didn't really have a sex drive anymore."

Satori counted on her fingers. "Wait, really? So why did you create a BDSM society in the first place?"

"Sex was something to share with my lover. And since she's moved on," Remilia spoke these words sharply and deliberately but also with a tinge of melancholy. "I don't quite have a reason to participate in intercourse. Back then, we wanted to make friends."

"And you found us," Satori, leaned forward. "You could just go to see your old friends again. We all miss you, you know."

"I could see any of you at any time just for tea." Remilia swirled her cup. "Or at parties. Summer Festivals in Former Hell. At the balls I throw. There's no shortage of opportunities to socialize."

"So what's wrong with socializing at our events?"

"We get back to the elephant in the room." Remilia refilled her cup. "Meaning I would be the elephant in the room, as I would be the only single person in a situation designed for couples. Well, not just couples." Remilia shot Satori a disapproving glance as she took a sip of tea.

Satori frowned. "You said you were ok with that sort of thing."

"I said I respected your lifestyle choices. But I'm a traditionalist; all these polyamourous relationships just strike me as a bit, ah," the vampire lord looked into her tea before resuming eye contact. "disingenuous."

Satori scrunched her mouth to the side and nodded slowly. "That's a common misconception. Love isn't a zero sum game, Remilia. Just because I love two people doesn't mean I don't love them." She looked at the ceiling. "Let me rephrase that; if I love someone, my feelings for that person aren't diminished by any feelings I might have for someone else, you know?"

"Very well. But I think there's something romantic about finding one person you can share everything with."

"Why can't it be two people to share everything with?"

Remilia took a sip of her tea and cogitated.

"Aren't you worried," the vampire said, "that one little vertex of your little romantic triangle is going to be weaker? That you'll love one of them unequally?"

Satori smiled sadly at her cup. "In my case I'm the weak point. But we got past that long ago. Rin and Okuu knew each other long before I knew either of them, and I just can't compete with that degree of intimacy."
"So can I ask," Remilia said, "how can you be satisfied, knowing that, knowing they have a bond that you'll never be able to compete withm"

"Because I know I don't have to compete with it. They still love me. And I them." Satori shrugged at the wall. "We don't have to choose, you know. We just are."

"I didn't mean any of this as an inditement to you, or your lovers," said Remilia. "Apologies if I offended."

"Nah, we get that a lot. My sister is a bit like you, like that, I think, so I'm used to it."

"Oh? I didn't know you had a sister."

"And you won't, after this conversation," said Satori. She ignored Remilia's quizzical glance.

Remilia cleared her throat. "And no offence to Eirin and Kaguya but I really don't get the whole 'loaning your sub out to to other people' angle. I'm perhaps a little too possessive."

"I see that as adventurous fun. Sex is something to enjoy, and if it's with other partners then more power to you."

"That's where we differ. So I don't think I'll return to any society gatherings. Not my kind of deal. You understand." Remilia set her tea down and leaned back in her chair and looked at Satori.

"Well, I'm saddened that I couldn't change your mind, but alright," said Satori. She placed her cup on the table, stood up and bowed before making her way to the door.

Remilia smiled at the ground. "I think I'm overdue to throw a ball. Perhaps we all can meet up at such a soiree. Except maybe Seiga and Miyako. They creep me out, I have to say."

Satori forced a smile. "They grow on you after a while."

"Perhaps they do." Remilia stood up and clapped her hand. Maids appeared, to take away her tea, though Remilia held up a hand and the maids left her own set alone. One maid stood next to Satori, patient and demure. "Shall we adjourn?" Remilia asked.

"Yeah," said Satori dejectedly. She stood up and let a maid take her tray and another one escort her out. "See you later."

//---------------------------------------------------------------

A while later, Remilia packed up her tea tray herself and made to exit the room. She opened the door, and a green-haired teenager with a magnificent black hat and a third eyeball, stitched shut, just flopping around, stood in front of her.

"Who are you, and how did you get in here?" pondered aloud Remilia, domineeringly, toyingly. Koishi just tilted her head and stuck her tongue out. The vampire gently set the plates and cups down on a nearby end table, and then suddenly drew her spear and lunged.

Koishi dodged the blow with effortless grace, touching the tip of Remilia's spear with her right pointer finger. She wave her left hand in front of Remilia's face.
"We are not enemies this day," Koishi said.

Remilia relaxed slightly and smirked. "If you say so. But your mind tricks won't work on me, whoever-you-are."

Remilia began to ponder aloud who the interloper was, but Koishi wasn't paying attention. Her remaining eyes widened and her pupils shrunk and her mouth opened in a snarl and her body tensed. She twisted into close quarters and grabbed Remilia's head with her left hand, thumb and middle finger on opposite temples. Energy glowed in her hand and in her eyes, even her blinded, floppy one. "Ochadeen Valennor!" she screamed.

Koishi closed her remaining eyes, no longer glowing, and breathed a few times to calm down. When she opened them, she was smiling peacefully. "How about now?"

Remilia said nothing, but her face was completely neutral and her arms were very pliable.

"Awesome. So you want to invite Satori and her company to stay for a while. At least for dinner. She's come a long way, and she'd like to catch up with her old friend some more."

"Of course," intoned Remilia.

"And while you're at it, prepare an additional guest room. Like, in case something happens to the first room. Like sand worms, or cute vampires with Christmas-light wings. Can't be too careful, you know."

"Of course." Remilia sounded like she was a little inebriated. "What kind of host would I be if I didn't have a contingency for that?"

"And let Flandre out of her dungeon."

"What?" Remilia's voice returned to normal, though her body was still relaxed. "No. She's grounded."

Koishi pushed more energy into Remilia.

"That's the most important thing. Let her out."

Remilia said something in a singsong voice that may have been an actual song. Koishi sensed the thought had been successfully incepted and smiled and released her hand and allowed the memory of her involvement to fade from the vampire lord's mind.


Remilia reassured Koishi that she looked good enough and that Flandre wouldn't care, but she was brainwashed, so what did she know?
Flandre walked down the twisting halls of the mansion, past old stained glass windows and unrotted mahogany banisters. It was a smaller hall, away from the eyes of the main body of the staff, Flandre figured. Though not far enough that they'd encounter the skeletons of lost thieves or children who wandered off from their parents.

After being summoned to dinner, Flandre walked besides and behind her sister. She slouched, because her sister stood upright. She walked, because her sister hovered. She let her arms swing by her side wildly, because Remilia clasped hers regally at the small of her back.

"So we are having guests tonight," said Remilia, matter-of-factly, breaking the silence.

So they were going to try having a conversation, huh? Flandre could be civil as long as Remilia was civil; she could do that. She was so good at being polite, even to rude people.

"Oh really?" said Flandre. Nailed it.

"As a member of aristocracy, you will be attending. And I trust you to behave yourself."

"Psh," said Flandre, "As if I'd stay for dinner."

"Flandre," said Remilia, "Why do you have to be this way." Her voice was level, but it dripped with condescension.

Flandre forced herself to remain calm, opting only to roll her eyes. So much for being civil.

"I am trying to teach you what it means to be a vampire, a lady, and an adult. Why must you make this so difficult for me?"

Flandre sighed, more for her sister's sake than her own.

Remilia straightened her posture. As if it made her superior to her. Flandre deliberately slouched as much as possible.

"Who're we entertaining, then?" said Flandre.

"Perhaps you recall Satori, from former hell?"

Ah yes, former hell. She'd sent a lot of people there.

"Psychic mind-reader? Third eyeball, just flopping around?"

"Yes. She's in town apparently, and I've graciously deigned to let her stay in our elegant mansion."

"With her retinue?"

Remilia almost broke composure, something Flandre didn't see very often. The younger vampire stifled a wicked giggle. "Her ret- ah. yes. The bird and the cat. Her 'retinue'. I do think that is a good word to describe them, yes."

Flandre cogitated. They were alright. Okuu especially. She mumbled something to that effect, and the conversation died down.
Remilia stopped to look imperiously out a non-Euclidean stained glass window, her hands behind her back. Flandre subconsciously mirrored her older sister.

"And I think I'll be throwing a ball this coming month. If you want to help out during the set up," Remilia did not phrase it like it was a choice, "I'll have your dress touched up so you can attend. I think it still fits, yes?"

"Another one of those?" Flandre raised an eyebrow. Balls were lame. Lot of stuffy youkai, egos bigger than they could back up, but she'd met a few interesting people. The people her sister didn't really want to invite, mostly.

"Well yes. That's what we nobles do, throw balls. And the Scarlet's always have the best balls."

Remilia chuckled. Flandre didn't. Remilia told that joke (was it a joke? Maybe it was like some adult anti-joke.) a lot, and nobody seemed to laugh, so maybe she was just crazy. Flandre liked to believe that.

Remilia coughed. "But yes, that should be something to look forward too, yes?"

They walked along in more awkward silence. Well, Flandre didn't think it was awkward, but her sister had all these ideas about social conduct and stuff.

Remilia sighed. "I suppose you can play in the backyard until then."

Flandre pretended not to be excited. "Well, gee, thanks." If she ever showed gratitude, Remilia would try to use it as leverage against her in the future.

So she nodded and jumped out a window as soon as it seemed like her sister dismissed her. She landed with an inelegant thump, but brushed herself off and stretched her arms out in the sun. Maybe Remilia was watching, and maybe she'd feel jealous cause she couldn't go out in the sun, 'cause she wasn't a daywalker.

A couple maids smiled gently at the young vampire lord. Too new to know who she was, huh? Flandre flashed her best slasher smile at them, and their smiles froze on their faces. Flandre memorized their build and hair color and facial features. Maybe they'd make good prey sometime. The naive ones always screamed the best.

Flandre walked to the top of her favorite hill and flopped down backwards on the grass. She breathed in the pollen and air and wrapped her Christmas-light wings around her so she could roll down the hill, laughing as she did. It was a respectably large hill, and by the time she stopped, her shirt had grass stains and her face and arms had a few grass cuts that started immediately regenerating. She had to pull one of her wing shards out of her side, but she had long stopped being upset that her wings were sharp.

She looked up from the base of the hill and saw two black boots. Above them were legs that belonged to a girl, a yokai species Flandre couldn't quite name, with pale green hair and striking green eyes, wearing a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow and a tan dress with wide sleeves. And a third eyeball, just flopping around.

The girl smiled expectanly, her hands behind her back, leaning in slightly. Flandre's mouth opened and closed, and the girl giggled and offered her hand to help Flandre up, and it took Flandre a moment to realize she was staring, so she shook her head and took it.

"Hey," said Flandre lamely. Couldn't come up with something better than that? "Uh, I'm Flan. Who are you?"
A look of sadness flashed across the girls face before she refreshed her expectant smile. "Koishi. Charmed."

"So, uh," began Flandre. She didn't know how to finish.

But the girl held out her hand. "Care for a walk?"

Flandre sighed in relief that she didn't have to come up with something to say, and she took the girls hand and they started walking through the garden.
The Lake, the second time

Koishi walked with Flandre around the Scarlet Devil garden, allowing the shorter monster to point out all the features and landmarks. This was the rhododendron patch, this was the sand garden, here was where the mansion buried their corpses, here was the monster stables, etc.

Koishi knew most of the layout already, and trying to listen to it again, when she just really, really wanted to talk about what she'd been up to, and ask about what Flandre had been doing, was really, really frustrating.

But Flandre just looked so cute trying to impress her. So Koishi just let Flandre lead her around, until they got the lake.

"Do you like dancing?" Koishi said, randomly. Well, not random to her.

"Uhh," Flandre said, poking her fingers together. "Nnnn-yeee-" she began, trying to read Koishi's face.

"I enjoy dancing, sometimes," Koishi deadpanned.

"Then I love dancing!" Flandre said. "Like, for real."

"Then lets go!"

So Koishi grabbed Flandre by the arm and jumped over the lake, hovering a meter above its surface. Flandre stumbled at first but held onto Koishi's arms, until she lost her balance and braced herself for the impact with the water.

It never came.

Flandre tentatively opened her eyes and she looked up to where Koishis was smirking, holding her arms and hooking their feet together to keep the vampire parallel to the surface of the lake. Flandre flapped her wings to upright herself, and Koishi placed a hand on Flandre's hip, an amateur dance partner as they danced.

And they did dance, over the water in smooth, graceful arcs; arms aloft, hands always joined. They spiraled and bounced and held each other once and scraped the surface of the pond in splashes, sometimes elegant and sometimes playful.

And, too soon for Koishi but a joyful eternity later for Flandre, they found themselves at the bank of the river, a little wet, and a little tired

But Flandre avoided eye contact, though a blush tinged her face. Did Koishi move too fast? Crap.

"I guess dinner's going to be soon," Flandre said idly.

"Oh?" Koishi rolled onto her elbow and looked at the daywalker. "What're you having?"

"I don't know. All our humans paid their taxes and we only found one outsider last month, so there probably won't be enough human flesh to go around. So we'll have something gross, probably," Flandre stuck her tongue out, "Like broccoli. Blech."

"I hate broccoli."
"One day I will have all the broccoli in Gensoukyou burned alive as an example to all the other gross vegetables, like brusslesprouts and celery."

"Agreed."

Koishi turned back on her back and they lay in silence for a moment.

"So what do you like to eat?" Koishi ventured.

"Hmmm." Flandre began. "Cheese. The kind from cows."

"Oh? Our cheese comes from goats."

"Yeah, that stuff's okay too, but I like the cow cheese."

"I like bacon. It's against my sister's religion to eat meat, which only makes it sweeter."

"Oh I know what you mean," Flandre said, "I'm not supposed to eat peaches because I'm allergic but I do anyway. And every time we go to Tenshi's peach garden I steal a few. It's super sacrilegious."

"We have peaches at our palace," Koishi said, "Though we have more plum trees. Sometimes I steal a few too, though it's only my sister's servants who guard them."

"I've had plums before! They're really yummy!"

"And strawberries!"

"OH MY GOSH I LOVE STRAWBERRIES!"

And by the time they were tracked down for dinner, they were friends.
Another Dinner Party, this time with sisters

Remilia oversaw the culmination of her dinner. She stood with her hands behind her back, nodding slightly at any maid who made eye contact. Well, any of the maids that were actually helping. Those that weren't received a disapproving frown and a slow shake of her head. She was surrounded by children, it seemed.

But the most important child in her life hadn't broken any vases or mutilated anyone (Remilia was certain she would have found out about it if Flandre had), so there was at least that going right.

Satori and her loveslaves pets (wait, hadn't Flandre come up with a great word for them?) hadn't formally arrived, though the bird one had been seen around the kitchen a little while back.

Retinue! That was the word.

Speaking of which, the maid she sent to fetch them for dinner had arrived with a bow and Satori and her, ah, retinue, were here. They were all dressed formally; Satori in a dark suit with pink accents and some fancy bows on her with- Unaho in a backless green dress with a low enough cut to show off her reactor core, and R-iiiin? in a nice olive turtleneck sweater and slacks.

She'd really have to double check their names at some point.

"You all look," began Remilia. She gestured in front of her. "Lovely. Take a seat anywhere, dinner will begin shortly."

Remilia walked next to a tall red-haired woman. "My good friend and chef Ms. Hong has prepared us dishes from her homeland, chǎo mǐfěn, sū shí jǐn, and niúròu fàn."

Remilia leaned over slightly. "(did I pronounce that right?)"

"(eh)" Meiling went to sit down on one side of the table, next to Patchouli and one seat away from Koakuma. The guests took their seats on the other side of the table in a manner so that Remilia could sit adjacent to Satori.

"And I must apologize," Remilia said, "I've been feeling a little out of it ever since our tea conversation yesterday," Remilia said to her guests, and specifically to Satori. "I am having the tea investigated. If you've been feeling something as well...?" Remilia said.

Satori confessed that she felt absolutely fine. Remilia suppressed a frown.

And then Flandre showed up, still in her regular white and red casual dress, hand in hand with an older girl Remilia had never seen before, a satori yokai, with a tan dress and a magnificent hat, and of course, a third eyeball, just flopping around.

Remilia tried to get her sister's attention to tell her that this was supposed be a formal occasion, but Flandre just waved back cordially and started pointing out the names of the various food and making puns, some of which her friend even laughed at.

A happy smile grew across Remilia's face.

"So Flandre," said Remilia, "Who's you're, ah, friend?"

"That's just my sister," said Satori, flatly, harshly, to the floor, "Don't mind her."
"Your, ah, sister?" Remilia turned to Satori because that was what was polite, but she kept a corner of an eye on Flandre and the sister, so see how they were getting along. "I didn't know you had one."

"She's unable to be remembered by new people."

"That's terrible." Remilia blinked a couple times. How are you supposed to respond to something like that? "You have my deepest condolences."

Satori attempted to get back into formal mode. "Oh don't be. It's her own damn fault, really,"

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"I can put a psionic construct in your mind that can bypass it but it's only temporary and it saps your strength, so why bother?"

Satori was on edge and Remilia would be remiss as a host to let that continue, so she expertly changed the subject to other things. Catching up, mostly. Current events in Former Hell; the influx of youkai, oni political elections, oni riots. And for some reason the aerodynamic properties of steamed vegetables was brought up.

//-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Remilia offhandy grabbed a steamed carrot out of the air, preventing it from hitting her face. Flandre and her new friend suppressed a giggle from their corner of the table. Satori's retinue had gotten bombarded a bit earlier, and Remilia's librarian had something green lodged in her hat.

Satori hissed at her sister, who turned out to be named Koishi. Remilia wondered about the etymology of the name, but it seemed a sore subject for her, so she tried not to bring it up.

But at this point it was impossible to avoid.

"I'm terribly sorry about that-" blurted Satori.

Remilia waved the air, "It is no significant travesty, though it is delightfully inappropriate."

Remilia leaned in and Satori did the same, "And they just asked your, ah, pet bird for some of her food, so I'd duck if I were you." Remilia made to pretend to tie her shoe.

"Wha-"

There was a wet smack as a soggy eyeball hit Satori in the cheek. A chorus of giggles ensued, which Remilia, tried very hard to not be a part of.

"Koishi, that's it!" Satori stood up. Flandre and Koishi tried to sit up straight, their expressions tried to be flat. They gave up trying after two seconds. Remilia let herself chuckle a little.
"Now now," said Remilia, beckoning Satori to sit down, "Girls will be girls."

And Remilia meant that. She was certain she'd normally be upset about this sort of thing, but she found for whatever reason, she really liked the prospect of Flandre finding a special someone. Good for her. Remilia vowed to examine her feelings on the matter the next time she had the chance.

"They are both hundreds of years old."

Remilia nodded and shrugged. A piece of broccoli bounced off of her head. "But." She began.

"But what?"

"But I admit I had hoped I'd come up with a counterpoint to that by now. And now, actually, I have; they're still kids. Growing up doesn't necessarily mean growing older," Remilia leaned in. "And love makes you a lot younger, would you say?"

Satori furrowed her brow. "Wait. What?"

"Oh, you can't tell?" Remilia grinned wickedly.

"I- no."

Remilia scrunched her face in amusement and maybe a little condescension "Really? That right there is 'baby's first flirting' right there'. Sorry, 'Acting weird based on these new inexplicable feelings in my little baby heart'." Remilia coughed and dropped her voice affect. Meiling and Patchouli looked at her funny. Perhaps she'd had too much wine to be entirely in character?

"I never did that."

"Oh? Then how'd you awkwardly tease out affection then?" Remilia put her hand to her chest, "Sorry that's a little personal-"

"Well, It's easy when you can read minds."

"Oh that's right. I forgot about that." Remilia raised an eyebrow. "But I've been thinking about them this whole time. You didn't pick up on it?"

"It's impolite to read a host's mind."

"Aha, very well."

Remilia resumed her normal posture and swirled her wine glass around.

"Flandre?" Said Remilia, raising her voice a little.

Flanders turned away from her whisperings, probably eager to answer "Yes sis?"

It should have been ma'am, but Remilia could go over that later. "We take the dietary restrictions of our guests very seriously. Please return, ah," her name started with a U, what was it? Unalok? "Please return that dish to its intended recipient."

"Ok, yeah, uh" Flandre pushed the bowl of eyeballs outstretched towards Ulamog and then returned to her whispered corroboration. Without any fuss or sass or other synonyms for insubordination. This really was good for her.
"Aren't they cute together?"

There was a warbled shriek as Patchouli clutched her face around the right side of her forehead. It'd turn out some dipping sauce from a cauliflower projectile got in her eye.

Satori looked incredulous. "I suppose."

They shared their thoughts on that and both concluded that, at the very least, it was more innocuous than serial killing.

"And since it's no use hiding it since it's crossed my mind, ah..." Remilia leaned in.

Satori furrowed her brow and looked into the vampire's forehead. Then her mouth went wobbly and she blushed a little.

Remilia flashed a teasing grin. "It's of course a little early to consider procreation, but I think a psychic daywalker would bring the world to its knees yes? We could be aunts to the ultimate apocalypse."

Satori's face shifted through a series of increasingly amusing expressions and Remilia had to cover her mouth to remain a good host.

"How about," Satori said eventually, "We never speak of that again."

Remilia chuckled. "Fair enough." She finished off her wine, ignoring the carrot that had somehow gotten into her glass, and beckoned a maid for a refill. "So I wanted to ask about sugar tariffs in Former hell. We are starting a sugar plantation, you see..."

Koishi bid farewell to Flandre a little reluctantly. Well, a lot reluctantly, but she had to hide it. She held onto the vampire's hand a little too long and a little too tightly and her goodbye caught in her throat.

Not matter what it was nice, it was worth it, Koishi told herself. She breathed in and let a smile form on her face. No matter that only she would remember it. No matter that Flandre might not react the same way of her the next time. But that was enough for her. Koishi put a closed hand to her heart.

She didn't see Satori waltz up to her until it was too late to avoid the ensuing conversation.

"What?" said Koishi, flatly, annoyed.

Satori grinned an insufferable grin. "You like her."

Koishi's cheeks tinted turquoise. "Noooo."

"Oh you do!" Satori squeaked, clapping her hands in the most annoying way. "Just leave it to big sis. I can totally arrange play-dates and tea parties and, oh, your birthday's coming up."

Koishi's breathing quickened and her ears rang.

Satori was completely oblivious. "Oh this will be good for you. I can do all the psionics to make them remember you (it'll need a little touching up every so often) but it'll be completely worth it if
she'll help you be a respectable entity at last. Don't say I never do anything for you."

Koishi slouched down. Her fists were clenched and her breathing was slow, deliberate again.

"No," Koishi said.

Satori laughed, the monster. "No? There's no reason to refuse Koishi. You're being stupid."

"She's mine." Koishi stepped into Satori's reach, striking the older woman's stomach with her palm. "My safe haven. My refuge."

Satori started fighting back too late. But she managed to intercept one of Koishi's blows and throw the younger girl off balance. "Now you're being crazy. I'm trying so hard to help you and you're just-

WHAM.

Koishi struck Satori in the mouth with a fist of swirling green energy. It took three more blows for Koishi to knock Satori on the ground.

As Satori attempted to get up, Koishi grabbed her head, thumb on brow and fingertips across her temple, "I don't want you here. I will not let you intrude upon us."

Energy flowed through Koishi's palm. Viridescent light burst from Satori's three eyes and open, screaming mouth.

Koishi hid in a curtain as Satori brushed herself off and looked around confused and walked away. Koishi closed her eyes and touched her heart and recalled Christmas lights and food fights. She alone would remember this, and it was definitely worth it.

//---------------------------------------------------------

"Flandre, a word if you will," Remilia said, beckoning the younger vampire over. She was a little distraught, as Patchouli had told the vampire lord that it looked like she had some mind tampering's going on, and not from Satori- it lacked her psionic echo. Nothing permanent, except perhaps for the eternal question of who did it, and for what reason.

Flandre didn't even sigh as she walked back. She was in such a good mood today and she couldn't place why. "Yeah?"

Remilia leaned down and lowered her voice. "I don't suppose you recall the bird one's name, did you?"
A young woman ran through narrow alleyways, mortar and wood and mud encrusted walls with barred and boarded windows on either side of her. Looming lopsided houses bordered each alley, occasional yellow lantern light commingling with the silver of a full moon. The bustle of a crowded seething city evaporated at night, it seemed; Not even the beggers were out, and everyone with a roof over their heads shut their windows and locked their doors, out of fear of things that may or may not go bump in the night.

With good reason, really.

The woman leaned against a locked door, trying to catch her breath, furtively glancing at both ends of the alley.

A small vampire jumped down from her perch, silently, gracefully, and sidled up right behind the woman.

"Hey," smiled Flandre, smile wide and eyes sparkly. "Remember me?"

The woman screamed and a bottle shattered against Flandre's cheek. Flandre tentatively prodded an already-healing array of cuts on her face as the woman's panicked footsteps faded into another alleyway.

"Oh," she breathed, "I love the ones that fight."

Flandre took to the rooftops, jumping the narrow gaps between housing sections. To maximize space, houses expanded outward with each new story so that even some of the roads wide enough for carts turned into makeshift tunnels in some parts. True, Flandre could fly, but that'd be cheating. Funny how even in a wretched smattering of urban tumor that was growing vertically now that the horizontal directions between rivers had been filled, nobody looked up.

Flandre took a shortcut to the end of the street and dropped down to ground level, catching her prey in mid alleyway-

In the clutches of another woman.

"Hel~lo there!" chirped the other woman. She had her hand over the woman's mouth. In the darkness, the stranger's eyes were shadowed by a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow but she had a toothy smile manic enough to remind Flandre of her own reflection.

Flandre stood up straight and stretched out her Christmas-light wings and hoped her hat wasn't off kilter enough to undermine her presence.

"That's mine," Flandre seethed.

"Finder's keepers," retorted the strange woman. She turned to the writhing human in her clutches.

Flandre grit her teeth and walked in a wide circle around "Look, lady, I came out here to vent some
aggression and you're getting in my way. Is that a position you really want to be in?"

"There's hundreds of souls out tonight," said the stranger. She stroked the woman's face again. "Most of which, nobody would miss."

"But none quite as pretty," Flandre said, letting the clack of her shoes on cobblestone punctuate her words, "Unless you're volunteering yourself as a replacement."

Flandre cogitated as she walked; this stranger might do, actually; she was a bit younger than her original prey, but still seemingly older than Flandre. The pale green of her hair and the third eyeball, just flopping around, signaled her out as some sort of Youkai, probably, but it was hard to tell for some reason. Flandre was pretty sure she had night vision.

And, if she was some sort of amateur serial killer, Flandre should probably nip this in the bud. Probably make an example of her for any potential copycats while she was at it. Can't have any competition now, can we?

The stranger giggled, prompting the human in her clutches to shiver. "Aww, aren't you just the sweetest thing? Tell you what," the stranger twirled a finger around the human's hair, "Why don't I let her go with a ten second head start, and the first of us to find her can have her?"

Flandre stopped pacing and raised an eyebrow. "A wager?"

The stranger giggled and nodded, and Flandre gave the impression of shrugging and agreed.

Five seconds into the head start, as the two of them watched the human recede into the fog and lantern-shadows, Flandre flexed the claws on her right hand before striking the stranger in her sternum, to tear her heart out of her ribcage, the hard way. At least, that was the plan, but the next thing Flandre knew, the stranger was a meter and a half to the side, her fingers clasped like spiders in front of her face. Flandre could see her eyes now; striking green and full of madness. Her slasher smile widened even more, while Flandre's frown increased an opposite amount.

"That was merely, a ruse to get you to let go of her," explained Flandre as her posture reverted from combat mode.

"Aww," pouted the stranger. She leaned her upper body forward as she pontificated with her hands. "You don't want to play a game with me?"

Well, Flandre did came out here to have some fun. To let out steam after she decided she couldn't deal with the boredom and an overbearing sister and a profound sense of dissatisfaction that had been festering forever. To have some time to not just be the cute little psychopath womanchild in the basement, breaking vases and stealing cookies. To try out her adult voice affections. Also murder, couldn't forget that. This wasn't how she'd planned it originally but change was good for the soul, as Meiling said.

//----------------------------------------------------------------------

It became both a race and a contest of sabotage. The stranger didn't have the same proclivity towards climbing as Flandre did, but she was very fast even though she seemed to nonchalantly skip everywhere, and she was very adept at weaving through all the carts and boxes and rotting food and neglected corpses and neglected carts of boxed rotting corpses to be cannibalized for
Flandre threw what she found on the roofs down to distract her competitor; laundry, unused building material, gargoyles. In response though, the stranger collapsed a painter's scaffold while Flandre was traversing it, and as Flandre extracted herself from the wreckage she saw the stranger stick her tongue out at her.

Flandre knew this town, though; it was her regular hunting ground. So even on ground floor she could beat anyone to her prey.

 Except apparently not. When she caught up with her quarry, it appeared her competitor already did.

Flandre stood up as straight as she could. She could not, however, ungrit her teeth. "Well played, madam. Enjoy your spoils." She forced herself to bow theatrically and wondered how many humans were around at night. Some thieves, possibly, and maybe even some coppers. She could always break into a house

"I'm sorry, am I boring you?" said the stranger, loudly.

Flandre stopped.

"You won that fair and square." Flandre jutted a thumb out at the human woman. "Now I need to find another one, and it's getting late, so adieu!"

"Is that all you're here for?"

There was a thump, and Flandre turned her head and saw the human ran off into the night.

"You- what a waste! That was prime-" began Flandre. Then she straightened up. "I see. This is about me then? It was always about me?"

The stranger paused and then nodded.

Flandre tried to keep her poker face. Who was this girl? She'd tracked her down pretty well; knew her routes and techniques. A copycat? Or someone bent on revenge? What would sis do?

"Very well," Flandre said, trying to put her best imperious voice on. "Did I kill your family? I don't recall murdering any three-eyed youkai, but I'd believe it; that sounds like something I'd do."

"The name's Koishi." Her two intact eyes softened. "You sure you don't remember me?"

"Pretty sure," Flandre said out loud. Though there was something vaguely familiar about this girl. Probably just because she reminded Flandre of herself.

The youkai frowned.

"Well," said the stranger, suddenly icy and hard and- dangerous? "Maybe I have some emotions I need to vent too, tonight."

Flandre dodged the first tackle easily enough, and parried a couple sweeping strikes. Koishi squealed as she did, and Flandre wondered if she was new to street fights, or just didn't care about sounding cool.

Then Flandre counterattacked with a lunge, baring her claws for a rake. Koishi spun out of the way, knocking Flandre's hands against her forearm. Flandre skidding in the dirt and shifted her weight for another lunge. Koishi sidestepped the attack entirely, letting Flandre collide with the wall. But
Flandre twisted in mid jump with her wings, re-positioning herself to kick off the wall and finally get into brawling range with the older Youkai.

Koishi was on the defensive, countering Flandre's clawed slashes with sweeping circles of her arms. She spun around three times before landing an open-palmed strike to Flandre's collarbone that knocked the vampire off guard.

Flandre levered her shorter stature, ducking down to try to get more blows in at Koishi's legs. A blow to the thigh that surely should have at least caused the other Youkai to stumble, but she didn't; Koishi pirouetted around back out of range and posed, melodramatically.

Flandre realized that last attack had cost her a sleeve. Hot blood trickled down her elbow, and the wound regenerating more slowly than if it were done by a normal mortal, even a normal youkai.

The next attack sequence, Flandre was a little more cautious, waiting for an opening, and when she did, spinning behind the girl for a clear blow to her spine, crimson energy, not quite flames, enveloped her claws as she attacked again.

Green ribbons erupted radially from Koishi's body, pushing Flandre away. Koishi threw a punch that shot a spear of Viridian plasma which Flandre deflected.

"Oh, you can Danmaku?" Flandre said. Her wings shuddered as she took flight, her who body glowing, now wreathed in wisps of red energy. "Awesome; I don't need to go easy on you."
Flandre lay on back in a crater of timber and cobblestone, with some linen and nails and blood mixed in; she'd hit the corner of a house when she fell. In her hand was a small hairpin, golden, shaped like some kind of elegant bug. She wondered where it came from.

Dawn would be coming soon, and the bakers and coppers and other early risers were getting up and some of them might see her, defeated in a crater. Not that she cared about what they thought, psh. But if they stopped fearing her, that'd be awful. So maybe she did actually care what they thought.

Seriously, she worked really hard to get her street cred in this filthy human town. It didn't help that humans died at like 25, so every decade she had to start all over.

But for some reason, Flandre couldn't muster up the energy to extract herself from her crater.

"So. This was obviously a magic duel," said her sister. Remilia Scarlet herself had graced the town with her presence, and was currently looking down into the crater at her, a purple parasol, open against the east horizon, resting on her shoulders. She had brought an unnecessarily large retinue from the Mansion; various maids in work overwear were gathering rubble and fixing buildings and examining their contracts for clauses concerning construction work.

Remilia smiled cruelly. "And it's pretty obvious that you lost."

Flandre closed her eyes and tried to remain calm. It was surprisingly easy, what with her missing motivation and all.

"So I'm not going to yell at you," came Remilia's voice. "Not yet, at least, aha." Very funny, sis.

Some ultimate evil you are, Remilia didn't say, but Flandre could feel the judgement all the same. Yeah, yeah, she shouldn't have bragged about anything, and this was some sort of karmic comuppance, but sod that! What's the point of being an invincible vampire lord if you had to suffer the whims of fate like every other random mortal?

Remilia looked towards the redening part of the sky; she'd have to wrap this up soon. Flandre wondered if she could stall long enough to inconvenince her. "Do you remember what she looked like?" Remilia asked.

Flandre frowned. She really couldn't, and hoped she phrased that fact in a way that didn't make her sound like a wimp.

Concern flashed across Remilia's face for a second. It only annoyed Flandre; how dare she be a real sister now, after everything. "Patchou, can you you check her head?"

So with some random maid's help, Patchi made her way down to the crater, to lift Flandre's head. This jump-started her muscles; Flandre could move now, and idly scratched a gash on her arm.

"No sign of head trauma," Patchi said, "Though it's hard to tell with her healing factor."

"So we can't rule out magic...." Remilia mused. She was still doing the concerned thing. Was this really that big a deal?

Well, it was a public failure, Flandre thought. Since they were related, the villagers might
lump Flandre's shortcomings with Remilia's. That was probably why the older vampire made this all her business.

"Hey Patchi," Flandre said, "Is there something, like, magical energy-draining on me? I feel kinda out of it."

"That's just shame, from getting completely demolished," Remilia said. She floated daintily down to the crater. Daint-ishly. Like a daint. And Remilia knelted next to her, fake concern on her stupid face. Flandre swatted her sister's helping hands away, and gave Patchi a look that she hope conveyed a little thanks but also a lot of 'now get off me'.

"What do you remember about the fight?" Remilia taunted.

Green energy bolts and wicked claws and some sort of sutured eyeball? And they started on the cobblestones, shattering carts and barrels and bales of straw.

Flandre had flown, she remembered. On the ground, maybe she was the weaker combatant- because she was shorter! She remembered that now. She was almost a whole face shorter than her opponent. So she spread her Christmas wings and took to the air, to nullify that shortcoming.

And now she remembered her surprise when the mystery assailant followed suit. Well, a lot of people seemed to be able to fly nowadays. Important people; mostly powerful youkai. So that just meant she'd leave a youkai corpse when Flan was done with assailant."

"Mmmnnrhn," Flandre said, "Not a lot. Pretty sure she was a youkai, though."

Remilia suddenly frowned. "I do not think we've caused any particular faction offense recently," Remilia shot Flandre a dirty look, "Though I can't be sure something unsavory didn't happen without my knowledge or permission."

"Hey, I didn't kill anyone," Flandre lied.

Remilia waved the air. "The past is past. What's important is this; for whatever reason, someone is targeting the Scarlet Devil Mansion, starting with our most powerful denizens." Remilia snapped her fingers and a maid appeared with a pen and parchment. "We'll have to revamp security. We can re-implement the buddy system by tonight, and I'll speak with Meiling about the mansion's perimeter integrity."

"What makes you think this was assassination?" Patchi asked.

"Well, based on how much Flandre here brags about her fighting prowess, I'm sure nobody but a master killjack could knock you this far into the ground."

"I don't know," Flandre said, ignoring the compliment, "I think she was just a rando."

"How was she able to defeat you, then?"

Flandre wondered that as well.

She looked at the hairpin in her hand (wait, didn't she have another one of those? A clue!), and remembered the cool of the night air and the flow of air past her wings. Rooftops below her. There was a baby crying in the mid distance.

And Flan had her opponent- after weaving through a sea of random viridescent energy blasts (shaped vaguely like hearts?), they were at close quarters- her opponent seemed surprised, and not
altogether prepared for a mid-air melee- the mystery woman was a master at misdirection, she looked to her left; she was right there! Within arm's reach! So she swiped, and she lunged, and they were grappled, and Flandre had the upper hand-

And she remembered a smile- one that reminded of her's in her reflection- and

And her opponent smooched her- suddenly but passionately-

Flandre recalled warm lips and a gentle panic, not altogether unpleasant but wormy and weird, rising in her gut.

And the rest was a blur. Probably only because she'd been knocked unconscious. Not because of the kiss or anything. Flandre would never be that weak. Shut up.

"Well," Flandre said. Her face felt hot; she was probably blushing (man, bet Remilia never had to deal with this, one downside to being a mutant huh?) and she had to clear her throat before she could speak. "She, uh," Flandre began, "She kissed me. Like, on the mouth."

And to Flandre's relief, Remilia didn't seem to make an especially big deal about it. "The old tactical smooch, huh? Well, that rules out some potentials..." She seemed to be lost in thought.

And now that Flan had these memories, faded as though they may be, she only wanted to wander them.

Especially since they seemed to get less clear as time went on (by the next day, Flandre would find they would be completely gone). Flandre didn't resist when someone pulled her out of the wreckage and she was vaguely aware that a group of maids was filling in her impact crater.

And then the sun peaked up, which was the signal to leave. Remilia sighed; the broken cottages and streets weren't fully repaired, so she made arrangement to return with the crew that evening.

Remilia turned to leave, but before she did she looked over her shoulder, under the parasol. The shadow made her teeth look shinier and her crimson irises appear to glow.

"And Flandre," Remilia smirked wickedly, "A vampire who succumbs to seduction is a failure to our race. Do try not to let it happen again."

And then, somehow, Flandre found her motivation to get out of the crater. She suspected it was rage.
Flandre nervously (And quite adorably, if she did say so herself) sauntered up to the tea room of the Scarlet Devil Mansion. It was in the center of the mansion, yet always had eerie rays of light illuminating quiet dances of airborne dust, no matter how recently it was cleaned. And the light shone in from two directions, which was cool the first time Flandre had seen it. The shadows here were too long and you couldn't help but feel that gravity was pulling you at an angle.

The tea room itself had wonderfully embroidered pink patterns on every door and window and piece of furniture. The boards creaked in one spot, so Remilia always had the dainty tea table set in that specific point.

The Scarlet Devil herself, as well as the gardener, were having tea. There was a third chair; presumably, Patchi was invited but was taking care of her new familiar. Flandre liked Koakuma, she decided; she was new enough to be afraid of the younger vampire lord, and had cute ears.

“So I don't know why I want to ask this,” said Flandre to the tea-drinkers, “but, uh.” She flashed her teeth. "How do you, like, seduce someone?” She might not have been as imposing as she would had liked.

Remilia put down her tea, very deliberately. When she opened her eyes, there was a soft smile on her face, mouth and eyes and all.

“Flandre, are you taking your position as vampire lord seriously now?” Remilia said. She flashed a pointy smile.

Flandre scrunched her face. “Sure, yeah, I guess.”

“Well,” Remilia put down her tea and smoothed out her dress. "It's all going to depend on your personal style, what you're comfortable with, and what kind of person you're seducing. You have no control over the latter, but with serious introspection and an objective eye towards the self-

“OR!” said Meiling. She downed her 'tea' in one gulp and messily refilled her cup. “You could just smash yer boobs in her face.”

Remilia opened and closed her mouth indignantly. It was one of Flandre's favorite expressions on her. Right when Remilia was about to speak, Meiling put her palm three centimeters from the vampire lord's face and leaned forward.

“What ya do,” continued Mei-Mei, “is find an excuse to take off your shirt. You spilled ice cream on it. It's got some stab holes. It's the wrong color. You need to take it off to inspect your stab holes. You got stabbed with ice cream and now your shirt's the wrong color. Whatever.”

Flandre nodded.

“So you do, and like, you're wearing this super cute bra, light pink and only a little padded with a little bow on the front 'cause it's a present for your hunny, and you're saying 'I'm just a sweet naive little waif, please teach me the ways of the world and the ways of my own body','”- Meiling had been pontificating some kind of circles and had raised the pitch of her voice for the last part, “Or you're going for 'unexpectedly saucy', and you're wearing this black little number, all lace and frills and it's a little uncomfortable where your shirt causes it to rub against your skin but she's all 'damn, girl, you're so mature!' and you just smile and raise your eyebrows twice and then she's blushing real hard, 'cause she wants to jump your bones right there 'n then, but she's holding herself back,
'cause now she's the innocent one, and she's waiting for you to make the move-

"Meling-" said Remilia, her eyes closed.

"And then – and here's the part that you have to improvise- you get above them, like pushing them on the bed and then straddling their waist, or like they're on the riverbank and you're more ashore then them, and you stroke their chin, all 'come hither',"

"Mei-<cough>-Meiling-," Remilia said, a little more forcefully, a little less composed. Flandre saw a vein pop in the vampire lord's forehead and kicked her legs in excitement.

"Please go on, Meiling." Flandre said. It didn't seem to encourage or discourage the gardener's speech, but Flandre knew Remilia heard her say it, and that was the important bit, ohohoho.

"And ya just hug- gently mind you- hug the back of thier head and push them into your chest. The naked part of your chest, above the bra, so they can smell the fabric conditioner of your bra- it's super important you figure out what you want your clothes to smell like, i'll tell you about that later- but they also smell you, your skin and sweat and maybe a little musk, 'cause that's who you are and if they love ya the'll love all of ya, and later on in yer relationship, when yer not concerned with tryin' ta be perfect for 'em, you'll make out like right after ya finish working out and yer still covered in sweat-"

"Meiling, that is my sister you are describing," Remilia managed to say. "My baby sister."

The gardener smiled mischievously but otherwise continued with her speech. “And you rest your chin on her head, and smell her hair. I mean, tha's a reward in and of itself, 'cause when you love someone you love everything about them, including their smell, see previous paragraph-

“I must disagree on some minutia about that point-” began Remilia

“But you gotta do it loudly, so she knows you just smelled her, so that they know yer inoa them, and yer takin the opportunity to be intimate with them," Meiling smiled wickedly, "And then, if she's bold, she'll smooch ya, but if she's still shy, ya smooch her."

Flandre nodded, looking at her notepad (When did she procure that again? A maid popped by and delivered it and a pen maybe? Eh, didn't matter.) and her notes, "I see I see." she said.

“So,” began Flandre, slowly, trying to read her scribbles. “Smelling people is seductive.”

“Yep.” said Meiling.

“That is not an axiom, both of you,” Remilia tried to say.

"It is where I'm from," Meiling said.

“Just one question though,” said Flandre, reviewing her notes.

“Yeah?”

“What's a bra?”

Remilia choked on her tea.

“-Actually perhaps you're a little young for this lesson Flandre-” wheezed the vampire lord.

“A bra is-” Meiling said.
Remilia put her palm three centimeters in front of Meiling's face, 'cause turnabout's fair play. “A brassiere is its full name, and it is an undergarment for adults,” Remilia said.

Flandre frowned tremendously. “I am an adult.”

“If you were fully an adult,” Remilia said, "You'd need a bra, and since you don't, you're not." Remilia smirked. Flandre didn't.

“Well,” smiled Meiling, “Yer chest will grow in eventually. 'sides, some girls like flat-chested dames who don't need support for their mammaries." She grabbed her own boobs, idly.

Flandre cogitated for a moment. “Oh!” she said, hoping she had her revelation right. "A bra's a boob-hugger! I know what those are. Just didn't know the name.” said Flandre. “I sometimes take those off the prostitutes I kill.”

Flandre maaayy have timed her words to when Remilia was trying to take a sip of tea. Half the time, her sister choked and Flandre had no idea why. This was one of those times.

"W-<cough>-why are you killing prostitutes, Flandre?"

"Oh, one of the other serial killers I know said that's how it's done," Flandre said. "She challenged me to a contest, and to take their bra's as proof." Flandre smiled her biggest smile. "I won!"

"And-" Remilia tried to make eye contact with Meiling, who held a smirk in her left hand. Remilia turned to her sister. "What do you think prostitutes do?"

"Oh, they fish for things. Fish for fish, mostly," Flandre said, "But sometimes eels and squids. That's why they're also called 'hookers'."

Remilia took a long sip of her tea. "That is correct," she said.
In the Palace of the Earth Spirits, amid ancient, overgrown stone Bodhisattva's, riddled with cracks and illuminated by shafts of red hell-light from holes in the ceiling, itself a crumbling, faded tapestry depicting a forgotten story of heroes and deities lost to time, was a small, recent collection of wooden crates and wicker furnishings, where a Kasha sorted corpses.

Koishi skipped in midair brushing the crumbling, dancing around the spots of light and immolating the occasional errant bird or weasel that had made its way into the neglected temple.

She thought of a kiss- a kiss that didn't happen, she had to remind herself. A kiss that only existed in her head, and no matter how fondly she remembered it or how desperately she shuddered as she recalled that lustful act- it didn't exist in any meaningful sense of the term. She'd learned this- when a tree falls in a void, it is the sentient perception of sound that doesn't occur.

“Hey, Rin,” began Koishi as she approached the Kasha, the cat demon. She pulled an ornate wicker chair out from a nearby table, spun it around a couple times before placing it in front of her so she could sit on it backwards, resting her chin on her crossed arms on the back.

“Yeah?”

“And Okuu, if she's here?” Koishi held her breath for a second as she tried to sense a third life force.

“She'll be here in a bit, actually,” Rin reclined on her own chair and pulled out her pipe and her tobacco pouch. “What's up?”

“I uh,” Koishi said. “Well, I don't want Satori to really know about this, so...”

Rin grinned wickedly. “So it's a sex thing, huh?”

Koishi almost fell out of her chair, which was quite a feat for someone who could levitate. She eventually stammered something that she thought sounded like a no, and then stammered something that she thought sounded like a yeah.

Rin laughed, the kind of laugh Koishi associated with mockery, but she knew better than to think that of Rin. Or, at least, she thought she did. Well, if Rin was making fun of her, she'd let it slide, for old times sake. “Well, aren't you all grown up now, huh? You gotcha self a real cutie you want genuine affection from?”

Koishi's cheeks tinted turquoise and she bit her cheek.
“Well, as someone who's been in a relationship for centuries,” Rin said, “I don't know if I can really give advice on how to seduce a stranger.” She blew a couple rings.

Koishi waited expectantly.

“But I reckon if you're cute enough,” Rin looked out the window, "You can start a relationship with what's called a 'meet cute'."

Rin took a puff of her pipe. Koishi leaned forward expectantly, two eyes and both ears wide.

"So what you need to do is make a very specific impression," Rin said, "It involves giving the appearance of weakness (It may or may not be an act), so that the other girl can feel helpful and cool by helping you out. Falling on your face while doing an important errand is a classic. Then you can say 'Oh no, I need to do this important errand or something bad will happen! Who will help me?'," Rin had a squeaky voice for that last part. "And then she'll puff up her chest and put on a determined face", Rin did an impression of such, "And she'll be all 'don't worry madam, I'm here to help.' And then now you've got a history which you can build on. Ask for her address sometime during, and make plans to meet again as you part ways, smiling and touching your head ornament sheepishly."

There was a rustle of wind and the nuclear chattering of the magic in Koishi's teeth that was the prelude to Okuu coming on set, and a few moments later there was a loud thump and a little groan as the hell raven picked herself off the floor in front of a mostly-intact arch.

Rin smiled, a candid, awkward smile, while a blush tinted her cheeks. “See? Right there. Adorable as alllll heeeelllllll.”

Okuu rubbed her head and pouted.

“You okay, love?” said Rin, a little less cool as ever. Well, now she looked like she was trying to be cool, which Koishi gathered was the exact opposite of being cool. Cool was something you were.

“I missed the windowststill again,” whined Okuu, still rubbing her head, where a red mark appeared.

“Aw, you poor thing,” said Rin. She sat up in her chair and patted her knee twice. “Come here and let me fix it.”

Okuu's mouth went wobbly and she walked up to her partner and lay her head in Rin's lap.

She then sat back up and rubbed Okuu's head and the bird unfurled her wings involuntarily and twitched them. Rin leaned down to deeply sniff Okuu's hair once afterwards planted a smooch on Okuu's forehead.

"Koishi wants to know how to seduce someone," Rin cooed.

"Ooooh!” Okuu said, brightening for a moment. "That's easy! Shinies."

"Shinies?” Koishi said.

"Yes, Shinies. They have mind control powers." Okuu pulled a little red bauble- smooth and reflective and slightly translucent and likely made out of glass- out of her cleavage. "This is one Rin gave to me!” Okuu stared at it transfixed. Her pupils widened. "It's so shiny...."
Rin cleared her throat. "Depending on what kind of Youkai she is," Rin said, "You can also try chocolates."

"Yeah!" Okuu said, "Like coating yourself in chocolate."

Rin blushed. "T-that too, maybe. But expensive gifts impart upon her an impression of your social status and willingness to devote your time and wealth to her."

"I am trying to do this without mind control," Koishi said.

Okuu shot Rin a knowing look. For some reason it was really embarrassing.

"Ok, so then you do honesty," Okuu said.

Koishi considered asking Okuu to sit out of Rin's lap before she'd start taking the hell-raven's advice seriously.

"You tell her that you like her," Okuu said, "And hopefully shes grown to like you back! So if it's meant to happen, it'll happen!"

"But what if she doesn't know me? What if she's never had the chance to like me back?" Koishi said, a little angrily.

Rin and Okuu shared startled, panicked looks.

"You mean you met her after-"

"I met her after I blinded my eye." Koishi said through gritted teeth. She gripped her third eye in her hands, stroking the stitches. It was mostly numb, but she pressed into hard with a finger to feel a refreshing jolt of stabbing ache.

"Oh," Rin said. "Ohhh. So let's go over a strategy."
Koakuma, part 1

Chapter Summary

How Koakuma came to be in the mansion.

Chapter Notes

I understand that while the exact nature of what demon Koakuma is not disclosed in canon, it is almost certainly not a 'hound of Tindalos'. That's why this is 'fanfiction'.

Books.

Piles of books. Inscalable mountains of books, taunting with their musty, dusty smell, their crumpling crinkling as their pages fluttered and danced, and taunting with the sheer, immortal volume, volumes wanting to be read, knowledge wanting to be had, yearning to be held.

Koakuma ignored their subtle call; she had plenty of time to read, in future seconds, but right now her Mistress Patchouli required one specific instance of a book.

It seemed like just yestersecond (or perhaps it actually, literally was yestersecond? Time was as mutable a dimension as space, it seemed) she was dancing over corners, tiptoeing along the points where planes converged sharply.

And one second, a disturbance, like a light in the fog, drew her. Something bright, something like what the denizens of her new home called a flame. And it was dangerous, like a flame. It begged to be snuffed out.

So Koakuma danced towards the flame, faster and faster, a flickering waltz through the plane-convergences, through obtuse corners-

Until, one second, the flame disappeared.

So Koakuma sought others- other flames, though none she found were quite as brilliant as the one that broguht her to 'Gensoukyou', originally.

One flame grew into a young farmgirl, just learning to stretch and invert the corners of time. She'd altered the time to de-age herself. What a fool. She was barely two billion seconds in existence, barely an inkling of a blinking in the universe's eye. Barely a short gasp of breath outside the womb.

Or was she? Humans aged weirdly, as she gathered now, in her new life.

But anyway, that young old farmgirl farmwoman farmspinster flame, her light satisfied Koakuma for only a moment.

Many others came and went, similar unsatisfying candleflames, until one second, many billions of
seconds after she thought it gone forever, after Koakuma began to wonder if it ever really existed, or perhaps it was but a normal flame whose brilliance only existed in the magnification of her memory, exponential over time- suddenly, one second, mysteriously, for eternity, that original sun reappeared, that brilliant supernovea, that illuminant burning oval, that tear in the hole of space, that twist in the shape of time.

Koakuma saw it so clearly- and waltzed toward it so quickly-

Until she, at once, found her being transformed. Her Body, which now Existed, was smooth and continuous along all four spacial axis's, and equivalent along all points in the time axis.

It was hella weird.

And before her, still brilliant, still glowing was the flame. A smooth, continuous fleshthing that still glowed, but not with photons.

*You have hunted me for a long time, vestige of Tindalos,* projected the flame along Koakuma's mind's axis.

*You have trapped me, bright flame,* Koakuma projected in return. It was not in language, though Koakuma would learn that later.

*I have, so you will not take me. I think I will make you my servant, now,* the flame projected.

It was not entirely unpleasant. Koakuma became used to the strange, not altogether alien sensations and experiences and requirements of being smooth and continuous across every point, and though she could attempt to not be continuous, it caused her slight discomfort, and it took a lot of energy to reform her Body.

Koakuma learned to read, and through the books owned by Mistress Patchouli- for that was what the flame had said it was called- and the Lady of the Manor herself, whom Koakuma would meet at some later second, Koakuma grew to Understand more of the world than she'd ever thought she would. It was scintillating. It was bright. Koakuma may well become a flame herself, at some second further along the time axis.

And Koakuma grew to enjoy Mistress Patchouli's company. Being a servant to such a bright flame was a blessing, and Koakuma considered herself Lucky, to have been brought into this smooth, continuous world alongside such a flame.

Koakuma... reacted when she discovered that her Mistress Patchouli was frail, here in meatspace. That in this fleshbound world of continuous, smooth curves, where every point had a non-complex derivative, Mistress Patchouli's smooth, continuous meat body was near the bottom of the bell curve in strength, stamina, and agility.

What business did the brightest flame in this 'real' world, that realer space between such mortal senses, have in being weak. In being weak here, in the inconsequential continuous curve world?

Especially in comparison to the other residents of this non-euclidian, eternal labyrinth called the Scarlet Devil Mansion?

Miss Hong knew, of course. Whether or not the gardener would be respectful of it, however, varied as a function of time, especially in multiples of 86,400 seconds. The denizens in this continuous world had a name for that specific unit of time- what was it again? Ah yes; the morrow. Or something.
The maids—that's what these mortal familiars were called, yes?—they obeyed Mistress Patchouli, but they didn't Understand, they didn't Know Her Like Koakuma Did.

And Lady Scarlet, who intimidated even Koakuma, seemed to place Mistress Patchouli's health as a priority. Such care endeared the vampire lord to Koakuma, even though the Lady was responsible for providing asylum to Mistress in the first place, hiding the Mistress from Koakuma in the first place, those four hundred million seconds ago. The same asylum extended to Koakuma, now, in this current second, and for future seconds in perpetuity, and it gave Koakuma solace when she considered what other denizens of the Tenebrous Abyss might seek to track her.

The Other Lady Scarlet, though, Koakuma had only been recently made aware of. By accident, perhaps; she'd heard the Lady and Mistress discussing the Other Lady with lower decibel voices, in terms of fear and preventative measures and retaliation. Koakuma had paid it no mind during that continuous period of time. In this current continuous period of time, however, she had what was called 'regrets' about her inattentiveness.

And now, right in this second, Koakuma was trying to remember what was said about the Other Lady. She was mischievous, perhaps, and violent—which is what the smooth denizens called the denizens which acted in manners to make the smooth, continuous portions in this world less smooth and less continuous—and the Other Lady was a little vain and she liked the smooth continuous form of sustenance called 'candy'.

And now, right in this second and probably for a few hundred previous seconds, the Other Lady Scarlet hunched over a bookshelf. Besides her was a taller woman, not as tall as Koakuma or the mistress, but nearly thirty percent taller than Flandre. She had a magnificent hat that absorbed most wavelengths of light, adorned with a bow that emitted photons at a wavelength of 580 nanometers, and she had a third eyeball with a position vector defined by nondeterministic dynamical parameters.

"Flandre," Koakuma said, compressing air past several meat strings in her smooth, continuous throat. "What are you doing? And who is this?"

"Well!" the Other Lady said, "This is my imaginary friend, Koishi!"

The other lady (lowercase, mind) held out her hand. "Charmed, I'm sure, elder thing," it said.

"I don't believe we've met." Koakuma said, though it was perhaps a lie; she vaguely recalled Flandre mentioning a friend with components on both the real and complex axis. She held out her meat manipulator, and the imaginary friend did that mortal greeting with clasped limb endings. Funnily enough, the imaginary friend felt real. Was this what they called an 'overactive imagination'?

"So we're going to prank Patchi," Flandre said.

"We're going to prank her pants off," Koishi said.

"Teeheehee," Flandre laughed, her fingertips concealing her mouth.

"Heeheehee," Koishi laughed, her fingertips concealing her mouth.

"Literally?" Koakuma asked.

Flandre looked at Koishi thoughtfully. Koishi looked at Flandre thoughtfully.

"I didn't think so," Flandre said.
“But now I think we do,” Koishi said.

“How about we dip her lower half in horrible acid! Then her pants will dissolve.” Flandre said.

“That is unacceptable,” Koakuma said. She was growing what was called 'annoyed'. “For it would also dissolve much of her essential human flesh.”

Flandre rubbed the bottom of her skull. Koishi rubbed the bottom of her skull.

“Then we'll put a bucket on top of the next door she walks under,” said Koishi.

“When she opens it- boom! Bucket on her head.” said Flandre

“The bucket will be filled with acid,” said Koishi.

“Teeheehee,” said Flandre.

“Heeheehee,” said Koishi.

Koakuma made her face muscles curve her mouth downward. “That is still unacceptable. Her cranial meat is perhaps more essential than her lower ambulatory meat.”

“Then how about Cookie Roulette?” Flandre said. Koakuma was not aware of what those words meant in that order.

"We'll bake her six cookies! Five of them will be normal and thus delicious," said Koishi.

“But one of them will secretly be filled with acid,” said Flandre.

“Teeheehee,” said Flandre.

“Heeheehee,” said Koishi.

“Why do all these pranks involve acid?”

“Well we wrung out a xenomorph earlier today and now we have all this extra acid.”

“We have to use it soon or it will dissolve the container we're keeping it in.”

“Why not just keep it in the creature's chest cavity?” Koakuma asked. "Xenomorphs are by necessity immune to their own blood."

“We already used the body to prank the maids,” Flandre said.

“If you already pranked someone, do you have to prank Mistress Patchouli? Can you not fulfill your pranking urges with the less consequential meatbags?” Koakuma asked.

“Yeah we do,” Flandre said. “How else will we spend our day together?” She waved her meat manipulators between herself and her imaginary friend.

“And we already wrote it into our schedule. In ink,” Koishi said, suddenly summoning a small notebook from the personal dimensional repository the denizens called 'pockets'. “So we can't change plans now.”

Koakuma picked up a tome. “You could read a book. Reading can take you on an imagination adventure.”
“But you see,” Flandre spoke as she wrapped her meat graspers around Koishi's brain appendage. Koishi’s face increased in temperature and she looked up at the Other Lady's facial meats in yearning. “With my imaginary friend, I'm already on an imagination adventure!”

And Koakuma spent the next 7140 seconds disarming pranks and being partially dissolved in acid. It was mildly uncomfortable, and it took her most of the night to regenerate her Body.
Flandre pressed her back against a wall. Aside her, a woman in a maid's costume slumped against the wall. Flandre peaking her head out into the hallway. It was empty. She leaned back and breathed.

"Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit-" she said. She turned to the maid. "Shit."

She picked the maid up, over her shoulder. "Why are humans so fragile, huh? This is all your fault."

The corpse did nothing.

"Why'd you have to die?"

Flandre lugged the corpse through another hallway.

"And I know what Remilia's going to say," Flandre put on a cross face, "'You're so irresponsible, Flandre. When will you begin taking your birthright seriously?,' 'Don't you know humans are fragile?,' 'You did a dumb thing, Flandre. you're dumb and you should feel dumb.,' 'We have a responsibility to the people we hire, and by no means are we to harm them in any way.'

"I knew that, ok? I know we're supposed to protect you," Flandre pleaded to the corpse.

But the corpse offered no forgiveness.

Flandre never got lost during the mansion's twisting non-euclidian (And possibly alive? Probably not, but it might explain some things...) hallways. No. But sometimes she decided to take a scenic route.

This was one of those times.

"Obviously," Flandre said, "I'm trying to work out my anxiety with a nice round about route," she explained to the corpse.

The corpse did nothing.

"Shut up! What do you know? You're dead."

Annoyingly, the corpse kept making good points.

And then Flandre heard two maids who were also taking a scenic tour through the mansion. Or maybe they were just lost and hoping to find their way back to colonized halls before they starved to death.
Flandre froze, for just a moment.

Then she shoved the corpse against the wall. She hovered, so that she looked into the pallid face, frozen in one former-person's last moment of horror. Flandre thought it was funny. But no time to laugh now.

"WHAT DID I TELL YOU, MARGARET?" Flandre yelled. In the distance, she heard the two travelers pause.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO UPSET ME?" Flandre yelled again. "YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT THAT."

The two maids started walking again, only their footsteps receded. After a few moments, they sped up, until their walk turned into a run.

Flandre slumped the corpse against the wall and took a seat next to it.

"Phew," Flandre said, holding 'Margaret's' hand up in one hand and high fiving the corpse with her other hand. "Good acting back there."

Flandre skirted past the corridors. With any luck, Remilia would be too busy nursing back to health that that foundling they'd picked up yesterday-

"Oh, hey Flandre," Remilia said, once Flandre turned the corner.

Ahaha, so much for that.

Flandre glanced back; Margaret's corpse was almost out of eyesight. She'd have to distract her sister-

And then, to Flandre's total shock, Remilia walked into her sister's personal space and gave a hug.

Flandre awkwardly returned it. Two pats on the back and she tried to keep the pokey parts of her wings out of the way.

Crap; did Remi know? Was she trying to freak Flandre out? Was she expecting Flandre to feel guilty and confess her 'accident', and then punish her anyway?

"H-hey, that's a little unexpected," Flandre said.

Remilia smiled forlornly. "Feeling a little ...." Remilia began, " I don't know."

"Oh!" Maybe Remilia wasn't all bad...
Wait, she gets like this occasionally- pretending to be nice and all. Flandre decided she wouldn't let it affect her.

"So was that all or..." Flandre said.

"Oh!" Remilia ended the hug. "Actually, do you remember that book about the princess and the pirate? I swore we had a copy somewhere..."

Flandre scrunched her mouth. "I think that the old head maid kept one. Maybe down in her quarters?"

"Ah, yes. Good thinking."

Remilia smiled as she left.

After she was sure nobody could hear, Flandre turned to the corpse. "So that was weird, huh Margaret?"

Flandre shook the corpse's head (She almost ripped it off- oops!). "Yes, Flandre, maybe you've been wrong about her-

"SHUT UP!" Flandre screamed at the corpse, "You don't know how she's been all these years! You don't know how she makes me feel, or how she manages to make every. little. thing I do about my own personal failure to live up to something she wants that I NEVER ASKED FOR. One hug does NOT change CENTURIES of hatred."

The corpse offered no rebuttal.

//---------------------------------------------------------------------

The worst part was just up ahead; the main hallway, that guarded the door to Flandre's dungeon.

Flandre's dungeon entrance was near the main hub of activity, so she had to do some quick thinking. All the random maids would fo' sho' notice a corpse being dragged into the resident monster's lair.

But! with a sunhat, a dust-scarf and a pair of illumination goggles, the maid could resemble looking alive. A little limp, maybe, or drunk.

"Hey Margaret," said an older looking maid.

"Uh, hey," Flandre said in a low, sultry voice. She manipulated the corpse's arm with her wing. "I'm just escorting the beautiful, terrifying young mistress to her chambers. Pay no attention to me."

Flandre kept up the act until she got to the massive iron-bound helldoor to her pit. She creaked it open and then threw the corpse down, and then jumped after it.

"Phew," Flandre said, idly cuddling some of her mangled, stitched together stuffed animals. Flandre allowed herself a 'freaking out' exhale into the fluff of one of her toys.

"Hey there," said a strange woman. A Youkai, a little older-looking than Flandre, with a
magnificent hat with a bright yellow bow and a third eye, just flopping around. She leaned forward, her hands behind her back on her hip, looking expectant and helpful. "What'cha got there?"
"I didn't do it!" Flandre cried.

Flandre, the stranger, and the corpse were the only ones here in the vampire lord's basement abyss. The massive room was floored with perfectly interlocking smooth dark stones. You couldn't see the walls, through the darkness. Every so often a twisted iron candelabra erupted from the ground, but only the central ones were lit. Flandre had a lot of gothic stuffed animals strewn about, some desiccated with their stuffing strewn about- these were the treacherous ones, who spoke to Flandre in her sister's voice and criticized everything the younger vampire lord ever did. Some of the animals were normal- the newer ones, who hadn't settled into political affiliations yet. All of them stared judgmentally in the flickering candlelight with unblinking porcelain eyes. What furniture there was was made of stone, carved as if for a cathedral, save for an ornate black coffin, lined with iron chains. It was a cathedral dungeon, perhaps, to ward against its unholy prisoner.

The stranger appeared a little older than Flandre; a teenager, perhaps, but with Youkai you never knew. She leaned forward, nervously, cautiously, optimistically. She had a magnificent, wide-brimmed black hat - with a yellow bow- atop a shoulder-length bob of green hair. She had a third eyeball (stitched shut, Flandre noticed, wincing when she did), just flopping around. She wore a tan dress with wide sleeves that rode up to her elbows as she held up her hands.

"Woah, woah, ok," the stranger winked with one of her two remaining eyes. "I believe you. But if you did kill her, I wouldn't care. It's cool."

"I- I-" Flandre's nose twitched involuntarily. "I was just playing around! I didn't mean to!"

Flandre turned away, but then remembered that she wasn't supposed to take her eyes off a potential threat. She probably looked way too nervous. Flandre breathed in and tried to steady her voice and tried to regain control of the situation.

"She was new here," Flandre gestured to the corpse, which was splayed out in a way that would have been very uncomfortable if it were still alive. "And it was just going to be a prank- just a harmless little prank- and - and-"

Flandre grit her teeth and punched a section of the cobbled ground. It dissolved into a perfect half-sphere crater.

"And then she died!" Flandre fell to her knees. Maybe she shouldn't be crying in front of someone with unknown motives and abilities she'd just met.

"Hey hey hey," soothed the stranger. She approached the younger monster cautiously, "It's okay. It's okay." She had her arms out in a hug, and Flandre didn't know if she was willing to allow a hug from a stranger. But to her relief, the stranger opted to pat her shoulder. It was comforting, for some stupid reason. "It was just an accident. These thing's happen."

"Not to me," Flandre said, wiping her eyes on her wrist. "My sis is going to go on a whole tirade about this. *I'm* not allowed to make mistakes." She punched another section of the ground."Its so stupid! Argh! She's going to say it was all my fault, and it's because i'm stupid and irresponsible and that I don't listen to her! But she makes mistakes too! She's just as bad, sometimes, but-

Flandre sighed and brushed off her shirt. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be telling you all my problems. I'm sure you broke into my dungeon for a reason." Maybe Flandre'd get an answer about why this
rando was here? And maybe while they were on the subject, how this stranger got past all the mansion's defenses-

But the stranger only smiled a forlorn smile. "It's okay. Things can be about you for once."

Flandre chortled once. "Oh? I don't know what she'd say about that."

"She'd be super mad, because she makes everything about her, and she can't fathom that something doesn't revolve around her. And everything you do something she doesn't like, it's a personal attack on her; you're doing it specifically to hurt her, and if you just did what she says it'd be all on the up and up, as if she knows everything."

Flandre blinked. "Y-yeah."

"And she can't believe that anything she does wrong is her own fault, but everything anyone else does is entirely because of them, and she'd rather stand around and berate you instead of actually doing something about it."

"Oh my gosh, that's so right!" Flandre said. "Like, if its such a big deal, why aren't actually trying to fix it? And when I try to, she just gets mad." Flandre's excitement waned. "I'm never allowed to make up for my own mistakes and- and I'd try if I could, but as soon as I tell her she'll-"

Flandre took a step back, and saw understanding in the stranger's eyes. The taller girl forced a smile, a sympathetic, apologetic smile. "I have an older sister too." she said.

Flandre's mouth scrunched and her arms spread out subconsciously. The stranger took the hug immediately, patting the mutant vampire on the back. It only lasted a moment. An all too short moment.

Flandre blushed a little (that was a little intimate, for someone she'd just met, yeah? Man, one of the downsides of being a mutant- bet her sis didn't have to deal with this). She turned away and sat across from the corpse. The stranger sat down next to her, and Flandre spared the energy to shoot her a little smile. "She'll just say that I'm a child. I'll always be a child to her, who breaks things and needs someone else to fix them."

"Well," said the stranger, "If you want to fix it yourself, I understand, but what if I told you I knew someone who could help you with that? Your little," she glanced at where the corpse was slumped over. A fly flew into the dead maid's mouth. "Ah, dead person problem?"

"What, you can bring back the dead?" Flandre said.

"In a way, maybe," nodded the stranger.
They passed the lake where they'd first met. Koishi averted her gaze and refrained from saying anything about it, specifically, opting instead to ask about birds.

They walked through a seemingly-deserted forest. At night the glow of fireflies would illuminate spaces between quiet leaves as the lantern-chatter of the kodama manifested in the corporeal realm, but right now, in the middle of day, the spirits were sleeping, the prey animals were hiding, and the occasional fox or wolf or bear knew better than to mess with two of the most dangerous Youkai in Gensoukyou. Or at least, after they punched out the first bear and left it to mewl on the road a while back. It's cries faded from earshot, now, and the loudest noise was their cart; making rickety noises along the dirt road. Most of the Scarlet Devil Mansion's visitors flew in by air, thus the sorry state of the dirt road away from the mansion, but hauling a corpse across one of their shoulders all the way to former hell would provoke a lot of undue attention, and if they left it in a restroom somewhere, then well! That'd be super embarrassing, and possibly illegal.

They'd conscripted Koakuma into maintaining an illusion for a week. (Koishi liked the SDM's resident Servant of Tindalos. An eldrich being such as Koakuma was aware something was up in the memory plane when it came to Koishi, but most of their interactions involved pranking the angle-devil, so they never really talked. Harmlessly, of course; Koakuma could re-manifest her corporeal body easily enough. But, despite all the acid, maybe they could end up friends, in the fantasy world Koishi dreamed of when she found away around her self-inflicted curse.)

And it was just a few farewells, a few discreet gatherings of provisions (Some fruit, a few bedrolls, a map just in case, a satchel of coins in case they needed to buy something and were in too much of a hurry to murder the shopkeeper.), and they were out for a week, a nice little Orphean trip to ask Rin about the soul of a random maid, kept magically pristine for a week in the cart they both pulled, sequentially.

A rather large creak from when the cart went over a rather large bump brought Koishi back into the current time. She realized her companion had been silent for a while, opting to tilt her head down to stare at the road.

"Are you okay?" Koishi asked. Come to think of it...

Koishi leaned down and forward, her hands politely clasped behind her back, and tried to look the vampire in the eye. "You haven't been as cheery since you bid adieu to your sister."

"I-" Flandre looked up. She sighed. "Yeah. It's just-

Flandre stopped. Concern flickered across Koishi's face.

"I don't like it when she's nice to me. I know that sounds stupid and crazy but-"

Flandre grit her teeth. "She always goes back to normal, eventually. I don't know how long the good moods last or what causes them to go away and- and I hate not knowing, if she'll be nice to me or not." Flandre wiped an eye on her sleeve. "I- I know she might not seem like it, but you have to believe me-"

"Hey hey," Koishi said, "You don't have to explain it to me. I believe you. I know how useful praise is when someone's trying to manipulate you.

Koishi held her arms out, in a 'plausible deniability' way, and was pleasantly surprised when
Flandre accepted the hug, this time.

Koishi patted the shorter girl's back. "She's going to tell you you're good and you'll like it so much because it's so different from how she usually acts, and when you cross whatever arbitrary line to make her mad at you again she'll make you want to beg forgiveness and demand you do as she says. It's just another way to control you; don't buy it for a moment."

"But," Flandre said, "What if she really does care? What if she thinks she doing me a favor, by berating me and criticizing me and telling me I'm no good-

Koishi's face became serious. She pulled back from the hug and tilted Flandre's chin up, to look her in the eye.

"It doesn't matter," Koishi said, "If she makes you feel that way, no matter what the reason, then you shouldn't listen to her. You deserve to feel loved, just like I-"

Koishi realized her face was heating up, and she turned away and bit her lip. She cleared her throat. "I- I mean, like anybody deserves."

They walked a little more, until Flandre brushed Koishi's hand with hers. When Koishi turned to look, Flandre squeezed the taller girl's hand in her own.

"Thank you." Flandre smiled.

Flandre opened up after that, during their day long trek to the literal end of the world.

The moonlight marked the emergence of the nighttime fireflies, casting soft shadows across the trees and each other's faces, and the first immolations of the wood-faced little tree spirits that got too close.

Koishi tried to keep the conversation going as much as possible. She'd talked about her own sister, and Flandre repeated her own advice back to her- not in a patronizing way, in an understanding way. They shared more sister stories, and, for the first time, Koishi was able to laugh about some of them.

Those conversations were too depressing to keep up uninterrupted, though, and Koishi tried to ask all her favorite conversations, from all the forgotten times they'd met.

Hearing Flandre talk about her favorite food made her sad; they'd had that conversation several times, many times, and each repeat was a knife to her heart. She found it harder and harder to recapture the magic of their first meeting- or their second or fifth or eleventh meeting-

"Let's set up camp here-," Flandre said, after a yawn.

"Wait!" Koishi said. Flandre turned to her, and Koishi struggled to find something to say.

"I-" Koishi said. She sighed and turned to the trees. "There's- there's something you don't know about me," Koishi said, "Something wrong with me."
"Are you," Flandre glanced up at the moon, "A werewolf or something?"

"What? No, that's someone else," Koishis managed a chuckle. Then her seriousness reasserted itself. "I mean, I have a - curse, let's call it. It's not exactly one but- I mean, it doesn't matter what it is- but- ah-"

Koishi sighed and sat down on a nearby log, lethally dispersing a few spirits with an idle flick of her wrist.

Flandre looked concerned as she walked over and sat down next to her.

Koishi couldn't look up. "When you go to sleep, you'll forget all about me. And- and I want to steal a few more moments, with you, before you do." And then, as a whisper, "I really love talking to you."

Flandre didn't say anything for an agonizing while.

"We've met before?" Flandre asked.

Koshi paused, and tried to keep her face calm. Unbidden tears forced back into three tear ducts.

Koishi mustered the strength to nod, once, slowly and slightly.

"Oh Koishi!" Flandre suddenly hugged her, and a few warm tears fell on Koishi's neck. "I knew it! There was an aching growing in my heart, as I talked to you. I knew we must have met before."

It was but a comforting lie, Koishi knew. That feeling of connection was just the giddiness of meeting someone who understood you- who you connected with. All the young lovers felt as if they'd known each other in a past life, but it was just the first throbs of infatuation.

(Satori believed in reincarnation and was always going on about stories about people who felt that way. But Koishi knew better; there was a secular, psychological explanation for all that. Nothing could overcome her curse.)

They set up camp, and while they did, for the first time, Koishi relayed to the mutant vampire a couple of the stories they both experienced, that one forgot.

And Flandre believed every one, even the out of character ones, even the ones filled with seeming impossibilities- It- the trust, the honesty, the laughs and amazed expression of surprise- it was refreshing, perhaps this feeling was. It made her very, stupidly happy. Koishi's voice cracked a lot.

They sat in the opening of their completed tent, staring at the moon and the fireflies and the fearful spirits.

"So why do you keep coming back, if it's all just doomed?" Flandre said, at some point.

Koishi paused, just a bit too long, maybe, or maybe it was her lack of composure that gave her away.

"That was a dumb question," Flandre smiled forlornly to the horizon. She tucked a strand of flaxen hair behind her ear and resumed looking towards the satori. A blush effervesced along her cheeks. "I think I know the answer."

"I- Is it that obvious?" Koishi said. Her heart threw itself against her ribcage and her whole chest
felt buoyant and she realized she was hovering now, as if propelled upward by her heart. She propelled herself downward, to resume her butt's contact with the bedroll.

"I can see why, though," Flandre said, her face reddening even more. "I am pretty awesome."

Koishi giggled.

"And you are too, so we'd make a great couple." Flandre said.

"And, joking aside," Flandre said, "I've felt really comfortable and junk, around you. Like, you really get me. It's probably the sister thing."

"I- Yes," Koishi said, "And the murders. We always bonded over that."

Flandre giggled. She turned to the taller girl.

"So tell me," Flandre fluttered her little, perfect eyelashes, "Did we ever smooch?"

"Um," Koishi blushed and stifled a chuckle. "Maybe once." Or maybe more.

Flandre's eyes widened for just an iota, and then she smiled, wide and wicked.

"Do you want to make it maybe twice?"

Koishi's eyes and mouth widened in surprise. She leaned in, downwards a bit-

And Flandre leaned too, stretching up to meet her-

A soft peck on the lips, gentle and warm, confident and barely restrained.

Oh man, wow-

It was the best one so far- so honest, maybe was what the word was-

Koishi leaned back, afterwards, giggling stupidly. It was a great comfort that Flandre's composure was just as shattered.

The taller girl pulled opposite halves of the brim of her hat down over her face.

After they stopped giggling, Flandre leaned her head on Koishi's shoulder and looked up with her brilliant crimson eyes.

"I promise," Flandre whispered, "I won't forget you, Koishi." Flandre nuzzled Koishi's chin.

Koishi didn't know what to say, so she just hugged the vampire who loved her. It was the first time Flandre made that promise to her.

And, the following morning, it would be the first time Flandre would break it.
"Ahhh!" Flandre screamed. She crawled back, away from the strange lady who had somehow infiltrated her bed.

"Flandre- Flandre, please, calm down," the stranger said. Her hands were up and she backed away as much as she could from where she was kneeling.

"How do you know my name?" Flandre's back hit the edge of the cart.

"It- It's a long story." The stranger's face fell.

"Why are you in my cart?!?!"

How'd she get the jump on her? Flandre remembered taking a cart with Margaret's corpse out here to...

To something. Bury her, maybe? But a proper burial would be in a mausoleum or something. Was she just running away? She felt certain she had a plan, but maybe it was one of those types of plans that didn't make sense once you've slept on it.

But by any count, Flandre should have noticed if someone had snuck up on the cart, let alone into her bedding. Even if she was asleep- had she really grown so unalert? perhaps her stay in the mansion dungeons was dulling her senses-

"I- I'm sorry, I- I'll just get out, okay? Please, let me explain-"

Flandre spread her Christmas light wings and flew into a tackle. She hit the mysterious girl in the stomach and together they careened out of the cart.

Flandre was aiming for a pin, but it turned out the stranger actually did know how to fight. They scuffled and Flandre found herself thrown onto the dirt, scrambling up into a position ready to lunge.

She caught her first real glimpse of the stranger now; A Yokai, appearing a few years older than Flandre appeared (but, among Youkai, that didn't matter so much). She had shoulder length green hair and a tan, wide-sleeved dress. She wore a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow and she had a third eye, stitched shut, just flopping around. She was in a combat stance, but she looked reluctant. Big mistake.

"We-" the stranger began, "We're friends, Flandre, but you don't remember me-"

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I-" the stranger's eyes watered, "I can't be remembered. It's not you, it's me."

"So nobody remembers you?"

A complex expression flashed across her face. Flandre, frankly, was surprised she was empathetic enough to recognize some of the feelings; there was anger and regret and frustration, and a bit of betrayal- she recoiled, slightly, and her lip quivered and she averted her gaze very briefly. She grit her teeth and then forced a smile, with an intake of breath and a slight blush to her cheeks.

"That's right," the stranger said, "But you befriended me. We sparred, and laughed and
played. You were always so kind to me. You're the first person I ever felt really got me, and I really felt I got you too- we had a connection."

Flandre chortled.

"I don't know what con you're playing at," Flandre said, "But you clearly didn't do your research. I am not kind, nor is there anyone out there who 'gets' me."

"But- Flandre-"

"YOU DON'T KNOW ME!" Flandre said, partially to reassure herself.

Flandre flashed her fangs and spread her wings and let out an energy barrage. She lunged into the ensuing duststorm, her claws outstretched. The stranger ducked each blast, parrying each blow and dissipating each errant bolt of crimson energy. She was on the defensive- which might have given Flandre pause if she were more softhearted.

Because she wasn't softhearted. There was no way Flandre would ever let herself be... vulnerable in front of anyone.

And - on the offchance that it happened, if there really was someone Flandre knew so well- knew as well as this stranger seemed to forget- well, Flandre wouldn't be one so weak to let herself forget that. Perhaps her sister discarded friends and treated those around her as accessories, but she swore upon whatever vague amalgamation of deities Vampires were supposed to worship now, Flandre Scarlett would never be one to forget a friend.

And then-

Flandre stopped.

Dust settled.

Flandre looked around.

She was chasing something, she seemed to recall. Her right fist was balled and enveloped in ethereal flame.

She regarded the forest copse she was in- a quiet, currently nonmagical-looking and bereft of even non-talking animals. It was now marred by small craters, the carbon silhouettes of a squirrel or two on some nearby trees that hadn't been completely burned down.

She was a days walk from the mansion. She had brought a cart out to the woods-

"Hey," said a stranger.

Flandre turned-

There was a girl here- she looked a little older than Flandre looked, but since she was a Yokai that could mean she was any sort of age. She had shoulder length green hair and a tan, wide-sleeved dress. She wore a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow and she had a third eye, stitched shut,
just flopping around.

The girl smiled apprehensively,

"Hey," Flandre said. She lowered her fist but didn't put out the magic flames. Something was up-

"I know this sounds strange," said the girl, "But- did you have a journal in your cart? Next to your bed

It did sound strange. What was stranger was that Flandre did, actually, have a journal, in her cart, next to her bed. She didn't remember writing in it, but it had her name on it.

Flandre popped it open.

"'Today, I met for the first time a lovely girl named Koishi'," Flandre read, skeptically. It did appear to be in her handwriting. "And there's a crude drawing of you." Flandre wasn't quite so great at drawing. That at least, was accurate.

"'Only it wasn't the first time we met'," Flandre continued.

She read some more, sometimes aloud, and some parts- some parts that might have been a little too on the nose- she didn't. But the jist of it was that Flandre had befriended a strange satori girl who couldn't be remembered because of magic bullshit reasons

"'And we decided to make this journal to document our encounter, so maybe I have some hope of remember her, my first-'," Flandre didn't read the last word.

Flandre stared at the journal-

And she crumpled it in her hands.

"No!" cried the stranger.

"I don't know what sort of con you're playing at," Flandre said, setting the journal alight, "But I'm no stranger to mind games. If you wanted to infiltrate my trust, you shouldn't have been so obvious-

"AAAARGGH!" screamed 'Koishi', if that really was her name-

They sparred. Flandre shifted her center of gravity lower and held out her arms to flex her claws. She ducked several strikes and managed to rake the girl across the side.

Then they started using magic- the copse became a lot brighter-

And-

Flandre stopped.
Dust settled.

Flandre looked around.

She was chasing something, she seemed to recall. Her claws were out and she was charging up a danmaku- which she dismissed, confused.

She regarded the forest copse she was in- a quiet, currently nonmagical-looking and, considering the recent exposion, now especially bereft of even non-talking animals. Flandre shot an idle warning bolt just past the nose of a curious squirrel (or at least, 'just past the nose' was the intention- Flandre's confusion may have affected her aim). The copse was now marred by several large craters, a few smoldering patches of basalt rapidly cooling in the air, distorting the air above it. Several trees were burnt to cinders- some forest sprites were preventing a distant bush from erupting into a forest fire- and there was a leathery smear across a stone that might have, a few minutes ago, been a deer or something.

Flandre wondered what she was fighting- or was she fighting anything? Aw jeeze, did she fly into a rage and forget the whole thing- crap, she promised herself she'd be better at that- but then-

"AAAARGGH!" screamed someone-

And there was a blur of viridescent light and then a heart-shaped explosion, epicentered around Flandre's stomach. It knocked the vampire on her back.

And before Flandre looked up some strange Yokai girl was on top of her, pounding away with clumsy fists- fists of anger, of raw emotion, not concerned with being effective.

"YOU WERE. SUPPOSED TO. REMEMBER." Each blow punctuating the strangers screams.

"WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM, STRANGER?" Flandre said. She parried each fist with her forearms before leaning into an opening and shooting an impulse blast at the stranger's stomach- intending to knock her back rather than cause damage. No, that'd come after Flandre pulled herself to her feet.

And the stranger righted herself in midair and flickered-

To appear at her left-

She fought with magic this time- and it hurt more.

"YOU. STUPID. PIECE OF:"

Then she looked shocked. She dropped out of the sky, onto her feet, and she covered her mouth and her eyes trembled.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

And she broke down crying. She collapsed onto her knees and hugged her shoulder. The energy hearts around her dissipated.

The fight was over, and Flandre could get a look at the stranger- she looked a little older than Flandre looked (a little undercut by the fact that she was on the ground, bawling. That might have suggested she was still relatively young, or maybe it was just that something terrible had just happened). She had shoulder length green hair and a tan, wide-sleeved dress. She wore a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow and she had a third eye, stitched shut, just flopping
Flandre only hesitated a moment. "Hey hey hey-" She patted the girl's shoulder. The girl recoiled—perhaps only on reflex, because she relaxed as she glanced up.

"I don't know what's going on, but do you need some help? With anything?"

The girl looked up. "I- I don't know if I deserve this kindness," the girl said.

Flandre blinked. "Ummm," she began. What was that all about?

Well, maybe she'd start over, at the beginning.

"So I'm Flandre," said Flandre. She held out her hand.

The girl wiped her tears on wide sleeves. "I'm Koishi," she began. She clasped the hand. "Charmed, truely."

And they talked for a while. Eventually Flandre helped Koishi to her feet and the walked more along the road. Flandre needed to resurrect a corpse, she explained at some point, and it was an amazing coincidence, because Koishi knew just where to go for such an errand.
Flandre visits Koishi's place, finally.

Chapter Notes

These are by no means canonical depictions of the Palace of the Earth Spirits or of Former Hell.

But, this is by no means a canonical account of Flandre's and Koishi's relationship. In canon they have never met. I don't care; I ship it.

The palace of the earth spirits was, ironically, not very spirit-y. It never had been, since Koishi and Satori set up shop that almost millennium ago. It was brown and overgrown when they'd arrived, and though they didn't actively destroy any of it (intentionally), it was in an advanced state of decay. None of the foundations were damaged, however, so the broken statues and chipped plaster walls and creeping moss made it look scenic.

Koishi could imagine how it might look with spirits- little lanterns of soft purple light dancing upon the terracotta sculptures and bas reliefs of old Bodhisattvas and warrior-heroes, great poets and mothers and artisans.

But, alas, it didn't look all spooky and spirity. It only looked lonely- or, as Koishi tried to convince herself, 'full of adventuring potential'. The aqueducts were dry, except the one they'd restored, and the statues were crumbling, but the collapsed walls just meant the view of the ruined skyscrapes down in Former Hell was always visible, and the red shadows cast by the bloated dying hellsun looked all the more mesmerizing.

Koishi explained all this to Flandre once they arrived- they had time,- to wander the ruins, running hands along cracked stonework and playing hide and seek behind the weeds and broken columns- to sit on a minaret and enjoy the sunset through the metal fingers in the distance.

And eventually they went to what they were here for- Rin and Utsuho, (well, Rin mostly), who might know how to put Flandre's maid's soul back in her body.

And they went down to the depths of the palace- behind the foyer, through the back hallways, to Satori's private chambers.

This room was once a place of worship- a personal chapel in the palace for personal prayer and meditation, though Satori used it more for its in-built measures of privacy. This room was more well preserved and some effort had gone into restoring it, though the bed and drawers and modern amenities were, obviously, new.

Flandre brought her fist up to knock but Koishi intercepted it. She put a finger to her lips and beckoned Flandre to listen.

"They might be busy," Koishi smirked, "We might have to wait a while. Here, let me show you something."

Koishi took Flandre's hand and led the shorter girl through the halls. Koishi joked that, in a way, the room was still a place of worship.
Satori sat at the head of the bed. She was in a nightdress- a western style one, from one of the more modern human towns; thin shoulder straps with lace around the hem and the breast area, with holes in the midriff.

“Okay, so the scenario is,” Satori said, “Okuu; you're unabashedly in love with Rin and you're naive enough to not care about showing affection, but Rin doesn't want to admit her feelings and gets really nervous and blushy when you make your amorous advances.”

Rin and Okuu were on the far end of the bed, both also in new sensual sleepwear. Okuu's nightie was especially low-cut, showing off her bustling power core, and while Rin didn't have quite the figure to fill out her nightgown, her clothes didn't have straps and she occasionally had to pull them up over her chest.

Rin chuckled slightly and then coughed, getting into character, but Utsuho frowned at her master.

“Why do you always make me act naive?” said the hellraven.

“Well,” Satori bit her cheek, “I figure since it's basically your default personality, it'll be easy for you to act out-”

Okuu pouted. “You don't think I can act?” Then she pouted more, “Wait, you think I'm dumb?”

Satori floated forward immediately. “No! No no, Okuu,” She rubbed Okuu's cheek and head. Okuu, smiled and closed her eyes and enjoyed being petted. “I love you just the way you are. And you're very smart, in your own way.”

Okuu seemed appeased with that answer. Rin crawled forward and Satori rubbed her other pet's head as well.

“And next time, if you want, I'll let you direct the scene,” Satori said.

Okuu started out the scene with a hug.

Rin puffed out her cheek and turned her head, only for Okuu to lean forward and nuzzle the shorter girl's cheek with her nose.

“U- Utsuho~” Rin said, feigning exasperation.

“What is it, Rin?”

“I- we shouldn't be touching each other so much~” Rin mumbled.
Okuu pouted. She leaned back but still kept her hands on Rin's shoulders. “But I want to. Is that bad?”

“I guess not,” Rin pouted. “But don't expect me to just-”

Rin gasped when Okuu hugged her next, more closely and fully.

They cuddled for a while, running hands through each other's hair.

“There's something else I want to do, Rin,” Okuu said, softly, “Something I've wanted to do for a while, really badly.”

“I- I what is it?”

Okuu fluttered her eyelids. “Can I kiss you?”

“I-Idiot,” Rin breathed. But she closed her eyes and straightened her neck, facing Okuu directly, “I- I guess, if you insist, then I have no choice.”

And they smooched.

“Yessssss,” Satori said. She licked her lips. “Now, bring it in to me.”

From their vantage point behind a crumbling portion of the ceiling, Koishi turned to Flandre, “Maybe we should stop spying on them now.” Koishi said.

Flandre nodded three times. Her face was read and she had to blink a lot. She held her wings carefully so they wouldn't clink as they left.

They ended up back on that minaret, kicking their legs out into the night air. They could see the night lights of Former Hell, in the distance. The Oni had gotten the electricity in some sections of the city back up, and the flashing neon signs suggested some kind of nightlife, though from what Flandre knew of Oni they were likely to just be drinking and fighting. If she were to stay here- here as in, in former hell, for a few days (how long did Koakuma say her illusions would last? Could they trust her not to try to get them in trouble from the time Flandre had partially dissolved parts of her corporal form in acid?), maybe it'd be cool to check out the city.

“So are you seeing anyone?” Koishi asked.

Well, it wasn't completely out of nowhere. They'd just- well, you know.

“Oh! Uh, no,” Flandre looked everywhere except Koishi, “Not- not that I'm, like, opposed to that sort of thing. My sis took a century off from dating- called it, uh, 'celibacy'. It was a moral thing, I think. But I'm not like that- I just- just haven't met the right girl, you know what I mean?”
“And I mean,” Flandre pontificated theatrically, “I don't know if I really buy in to the whole 'relationship' thing, you know what I mean?”

Koishi tilted her head to her side and hugged her third eyeball.

Flandre smiled awkwardly. “I mean, maybe eventually I'll end up doing the dating thing. Vampires live forever, so I'm probably, you know, going to find someone, or just get bored sometime and end up trying it. I just haven't met anyone I think I'd like to end up with, you know? What I mean, I mean?”

“Oh?” And Koishi looked a little sad, just for a moment, when she asked, “What kind of person do you think you'd ever end up with?”

Flandre turned to the remains of a wall and tried to look nonchalant. “Honestly? I have no idea.” Flandre said, “My sis had a few long term lovers, I think. I don't know if I'm expected to be with a certain type of person because we're aristocats or whatev's, but I definitely don't want to spend every day listening to a nagging upper socialite discuss tax reform or talk about what wine goes with what meat.”

Flandre held her hands out to the air, “I mean, back when Meiling dated this one shrine maiden, she had to spend like two/three hours a day out maintaining that relationship, doing couple things, just talking, you know what I'm saying? I mean, like, I run out of things to talk about after, like, 80 minutes, and then I gotta do something new so I can talk about that, ya know what I mean?”

Koishi puffed out her cheek and refreshed her smile. “Yeah.”

“And Meiling became a completely different person when she started dating; started dressing nicer, started bowing to fiscal responsibility. Started pronouncing the whole word whenever she spake. She cleaned up her shed and left me a bag of single people stuff to hide in my room until she broke up with the lady like four months later.”

Flandre turned to her new friend, “And the first thing she did? Throw her laundry on the floor, eat barbecue chicken off her stomach on her bed and fall asleep with food in her mouth. We had to resuscitate her afterwards.”

Koishi giggled, thrice.

“And that was all 'cause it was all about appearances. Meiling had to hide how lazy-carefree she was because the lady wanted a nice hardworking sort of gal, and Meiling tried to be someone completely different in order to be what the other lady wanted. I mean,” Flanre pontificated, hands out, “What would possess someone to do that? My sis says that love is about finding someone who strikes the perfect balance of accepting you for who you are and motivating you to be the person you want to be, but even if they're, like, perfect for you, you still have to do the relationship thigns. Go on dates, plan your meals, that sort of thing. You have to put so much into the relationship- it becomes a whole thing you can't mess up on too much.”

Flandre looked a little forlorn, “Maybe I'm afraid of not being able to commit, yeah, but I think most of it is I'm just not a relationship kind of girl, you know what I mean?”

Koishi kept her face passive and was silent for a very long time. Commitment was, it turned out, something she had problems with too.

“So you don't want to get tied down, is what you're saying?” Koishi said.

“Heheh,” Flandre said, “Well, 'tied down' is a good word. I mean, I don't want to be like, one
minute, i'm on the streets, killing cereals, and the next thing I know I'm stocking a spice rack, wearing high-waisted jeans and taking out a three century mortgage on a suburban dream home for watching kids grow up in.”

Koishi giggled. “I don't know what any of that means.”

“Heh,” Flandre chuckled, “Me neither. It's just what Meiling said after we resuscitated her.”

Koishi removed her hat and examined it.

“But forget the relationship thing for a moment,” Koishi said, putting her hat back on. “Is there, like, a kind of girl you think you'd go for? Someone you'd say, start pronouncing the whole of the word for, or start pretending to be better than you think you are, for?

Flandre raised her eyebrows.

“Sure, yeah.” Flandre said, “Who doesn't dream of the perfect girl?”

Koishi giggled and was silent.

“She'd be outwardly sweet,” Flandre said, “I think, but that'd mostly to be to trip people up. Like, when she meets my sis, she'll be nice and polite and stuff but she'll actually just be being sarcastic. The world's a big joke to her because she's the one playing the pranks.”

"Sounds like a keeper," Koishi said.

Flandre nodded. “And appearance- I think she'd be the same height as me. Not that I'm particular to short girls- I hope I get taller soon, I mean. But that's always been something I thought she'd be. I guess I don't really care how tall she is- I can hover, so it wouldn’t be a problem no matter what height she is."

Koishi kept her poker face.

“As for hair- I don't know, sometimes I think it'd be cool to be with another blonde, so I don't feel so left out, but I think I'm partial to darker hair colors. Not red, though; redheads just remind me of Meiling.”

“And length; anything that's not, like, flowing long. Patchi trips up on hers so much I just don't think it's practical. I know some people like to brush people's hair but, like, what would be the point? It's just another chore.”

Koishi avoided the urge to run her hand through her own hair.

“And her eyes-”

Flandre made eye contact and stopped talking for a moment.

She looked away and tried to hide her blush. “Don't- I mean, don't think I’m creepy or whatev's, but you have really nice eyes. Symbols in the pupils- is that a common thing? It's pretty cool. I have a vague sense I've seen that before, but I can't quite put my finger on it.”

Koishi blinked and then remembered to giggle at the compliment. “Thanks. Vampires have really intense eyes, though, I gotta say.”

Flandre rubbed the back of her head and let her fang glint in the light pollution. “Heheh.”

Flandre cleared her throat. “I was saying, I thought she'd have cool eyes. Yeah, piercing blood red
is cool on vampires, but I'd like to look into eyes that were a little cooler- like, 'shade and hue' cool not 'awesome' cool. Maybe blue?"

Koishi blinked. She didn't say anything about her own aquamarine irises.

Flandre continued. “I don't think she could be a human. They just don't live long enough, and they're too fragile.”

Flandre glanced, momentarily, down towards ground level, at the cart and the casket she had her dead maid in.

“But then again,” Flandre said, “Most people would be too fragile to hang with me. I'm just so intense, you feel?”

Koishi stifled a chuckled. “I totally feel.”

“I- “ Flandre puffed out her cheek, “I'm reasonably self-aware, but don't tell Remi. She doesn't give me any credit, so I'm like, why bother? She's going to see me as a self-absorbed violent psychopath no matter what I do so, hey, might as well live up to it.”

“But I get mad when I get beat,” Flandre said, “Because usually it's due to underhanded tactics. I think I'd like someone who can go toe to toe with me and beat me half the time, so I can see how I am when I lose, fairly.”

“A worthy opponent,” Koishi said.

“Yeah!” Flandre said.

“And,” Flandre said, "Someone who distracts me from thinking about Remilia. I know I shouldn't obsess about my sister and it's probably not healthy and it definitely doesn't make me happy, but that's just - just how my life is, for now.

Flandre refreshed her smile. “As for what else, who knows?” Flandre said, “I know it sounds like I've thought about it a lot, but I guess I've only got those details. It's more of a, 'what can I distract myself with?' and a 'who might Meiling be impressed by?' kind of fantasy.”

Flandre shook her head and then looked at Koishi.

“How about you?”

Koishi's face fell, her eyes unfocused and she exhaled, sharply, once, real quick. She exhumed sadness, for just a moment.

“I thought I knew,” Koishi said, “And maybe it's just a minor thing I got to rethink, but, well, let's just say recent events have turned my idea of an ideal girl upside down.”

“Oh,” Flandre said, lamely, "I'm sorry."

Koishi forced a smile and waved the air, “No no, not your fault,” she lied.

“So you've got no idea what kind of girl you want?”

“I-” Koishi began, “Someone- someone willing to understand me,” Koishi said.

“Isn't that all anyone wants?” Flandre joked.
“Maybe,” Koishi said. She didn't say anything to follow up.

There was a minute of silence.

“Well,” Flandre stood up and pressed the kricks out of her back. “If that's all you're looking for, maybe I can help with that?”

Koishi blinked a few times. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“What I’m saying is,” Flandre held her hand out, “Do you want to see what kind of nightlife Former Hell has?”

Koishi looked at the hand and at Flandre.

“How late can you stay up?”

Flandre flashed a fang. “Without dying? Forever. Though I can do about seventy two hours before the effects start interfering with my function.

“Then- weird promise, I know, but can you promise you'll stay up as long as you can?

Flandre blinked twice and then smiled. “Sure thing.”

“Then I'd love to see the city with you,” Koishi said. She took the hand.

And they flew off into the night.
A Funeral

Chapter Notes

I hope I don't offend anyone by not even trying to be canonically accurate. Because this chapter is definitely not canonically accurate.

Also, you are not entirely supposed to understand Yuugis accent, so don't worry about it. If you're actually Scottish, then bonus for you.

It was a pub wrought from automobile shells and scavenged pipe, bits of torn up road and buildings, for there was never a dearth of debris. Any proximity to a population of Oni produced, in particular, a preponderance of debris, as well as alcohol, alcoholism, makeshift bludgeons, and alcoholism-induce blunt trauma.

Yuugi Hoshiguma surveyed the drunk, bruised (yet still partying) crowd. They had seen her poke her head and her horn high at the head of the pub, and they quieted down in deference. Not that appearances counted for much in Gensoukyou, but Yuugi appeared leaderly; she was tall and muscular and had just the right mix of aloofness and confidence to make even Oni take a moment to consider her words. The other possibility (Yuugi thought it was unlikely but she didn't want to think too ill of her people) was that the Oni in the bar actually were cognizant of who their democratically elected local leader was, but when did any population know that?

Yuugi tapped her metal voice amplifier and heard customary static feedback that echoed through the bar. The crowd was at attention.

“Wie be gatha’d ‘ere today fur tae pay ‘ur las’ respects tae a rie’ mukker,” Yuugi spake, holding the microphone far enough away that her bellows could reach without electronic amplification, “An honest soul ’n a might recalcitrant wee varmin’, who tae tha las’ puckle ne’er did she tint her laldy!” Yuugi held up her cup of sake. “Ta Michiko! May we shar a cup-a when e’re wie meit in oblivion!”

She held up her cup to toast. The funeral-goers held up their mugs as well.

Yuugi plucked a vibrato on her electric lute, a deceptively upbeat ditty in E minor, resolving to G Major.

“Hai un tha rood ta sweet Athay, Harroe,” She said, “Haroo~”

The crowd chanted the charnal chantey in unison, the most organized they'd been all evening.

Yuugi sang the line again, a step higher during the second half of the phrase, and afterwards she sang a different, slightly longer version of the line, in the original key.

And then the drummer and the bass string instrument joined in. Then the funeral-goers cheered and started dancing and head-banging and breaking shit.

“Michi, we 'ardlae knew ya~”
And Yuugi paused for a percent and preened enough to made herself presentable. Well, presentable in the Oni way; their race had a certain supposition around the superficial; a very particular kind of groomed unkemptness; dis-shelved but not dirty, comporting themselves recalcitrantly but not rapaciously. And they were to smell like Alcohol, but not vomit. Ya know, the positive parts of being a bawling, bellicose band of drunkard suckers.

So, Yuugi downed a large cup of sake and took upon herself the honour of attending to a visitor; a young-appearing Vampire Count, adorned with Mōdraniht ornament wings. She was arm in arm with a green haired companion with a distended and mutilated external oculus, just flopping around.

“Hello Mz Mayor,” the Count said with an elegant bow. “Our dearest apologies to the loss of your friend. I hope it is not too uncouth that we attend this funeral uninvited. We thought it was a party, you see.”

“Whit's fur ye'll no go by ye,” Yuugi smiled a tusky smile, “Oni funerals are par'ys, an' pure dead brilliant par'ys ta the last, ya see.”

Yuugi beckoned to the bartender. “ey, get summae that rum, wid ja? That wit we dis'iled frae tha impor's frae tha vampyrs plan'ations,” Yuugi stuck a thumb out at the Count, “Gonnae shae 'm wit we dun made o’ it.”

The vampire flashed her fangs and nodded. She and her companion, while not teetotalers, did not want to get drunk this night, so they took short gulps of the rum.

“Wie thank ye,” Yuugi said, “Fer the sugar. And tha's literal sugar, not innae innuendo, mind!”

They laughed.

“An' if aie mae cease winkin' tae the blind horse,” Yuugi said, “Whar wie adjorn ta tha' thar booth?”

They did, with their customary personal flourishes. They went unnoticed among the funerary din. The booth was curtained, and when the curtains closed it, cut off from much of the chatter,

So Yuugi did her best to look the part; she straightened her spine and softened her smile and clasped her hands. Oni couldn't lie, but, as a politician, that technically was but a tiny hurdle she could overcome in at least five different ways.

“I am quite a little glad you attended our fair town during a funerary procession,” Yuugi said, careful to pronounce the whole of the words and to use her practiced accent.

The Count Scarlett raised an eyebrow up on her forehead, in impressed surprise. “Oh, no need to drop your accent. I can understand your normal accent fine.”
The vampire's escort chuckled. "Heh, yeah, I, too, can definitely understand your normal accent just fine, totally."

"Please," Yuugi said, "Allow a humble servant of the public interest to attempt an act of gratitude,"

The Count smiled. "Who am I to deny such sacrifice?" she pontificated theatrically. Her escort giggled. "If it means so much to you, then I'll allow it."

At this break the bartender had brought their libation from the damned. Yuugi lifted her mug and got it filled with swill, while the vampire received a glass of blood.

"We have fermented blood as well, if you would prefer," Yuugi said.

"Oh, this is perfectly fine," the Count swatted the air, "I drink during certain occasions, but I have a propensity towards other vices though, if you catch my meaning."

Yuugi shot a smirk. "Well, I cannae spake for certain, but I'm sure we can find ya a willing lassie, eh?" Yuugi winked and laughed.

The vampire's companion made a face, surprised and offended, but it dissipated when the vampire shot her a smile.

"Oh no," said Lord Scarlett. "I've moved on to indulging myself more privately, and more monogamously."

Yuugi internally cursed herself. Of course the companion wasn't just another trollop; it explained why the Count was here, without any diplomatic entourage (though if she understood the accent, maybe she understood the customs, and thus didn't need a translator or a cultural advisor?), and without any trade goods, and without an announcement ahead of time.

Though it filled Yuugi with just a dollop of pride, that Former Hell had made it's way into the overworlder zeitgeist as a prime honeymoon location.

However, such a circumstance did tip the scale of bargain in her favor. Yuugi refreshed her diplomatic smile.

The Count gestured to her escort. "My companion though, I think, might like some fruit juice."

The ocular girl shrugged sheepishly and smiled. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all," Yuugi snapped her fingers. When the bartender appeared, she bid she bring their entire selection of juice.

And when it came, the girl seemed impressed, and by extension, the Count seemed impressed.

"Did you enjoy the funeral?" Yuugi asked.

"It's," Count Scarlett pontificated, "Interesting, and I mean that in the best way. We had fun."

"Yes, fun!" Yuugi smiled, "You see how we Oni face death? Not with fear, but widdae unbound exuberance of life!"

Yuugi pulled back a curtain, just a bit, not as much as her gestures might have implied. "Surrounded by the nucular ashes of a broken world, we strive. We revel, we do dance along the decayed highways, our children laugh through the drained riverbeds, the dilapidated..."
husks of dead progenitors. Even hell has died here- we're Former Hell, ya know? And yet we not just survive, but live."

Yuugi outwardly calmed down. She sat back down and took a swill of her drink. “I may be biased, but that's what makes Oni the most beautiful creatures in Gensoukyou, in our own way, I think. Our rabble-rousing, hedonistic nieve way."

At that moment, a partying Oni vomited all over another Oni, which caused a small riot.

“I see what you mean,” the Count said. Yuugi almost took offense, but Flandre didn't even sound facetious. So either she was willing to overlook the vomit and the violence or her tastes were on the narrow with for strangeness.

And by now, Yuugi’s aide had arrived with a manilla folder. Yuugi plucked it and thanked the intern with a smile and a playful punch and she dug through the contents or a specific paper.

"Now, I dont want to blow this out of proportion- I dinnae intend for to my grim portents and nostalgic musings bely some impending apocalypse, but I do wish to discuss some urgent matters of trade and diplomacy, if you wouldn't mind?” Yuugi said.

"Oh, uh,” Flandre said. She straightened her posture and smiled, once at her companion, and once at Yuugi. "Of course."

"We are of course completely satisfied with the sugar imports. We were hoping to increase them, actually. Furthermore, enough Oni have expressed interest in selling their blood, but we don't have access to enough refrigeration to make appreciable exports.” Yuugi gestured to the Count's glass. "That that's fresh, ya know? Good, innit?” Yuugi refreshed her diplomatic demeanor. "However, with your sponsorship, we could expand Former Hell's alcohol exports right mightily."

"Oh, we don't use that lunarian tech either. That's why we ferment all our blood tax into wine,” Flandre said, "Distill it on site and you don't have to worry about it going bad."

Yuugi pondered and then nodded. "I shall have the applicable experts look into it."

Yuugi pulled out one folder. “As for more personal favors; three of our younger Oni wish to attend school on the surface; Hatchi wants to be a doctor while Sumika and Hoshiko want to be teachers. They wish to learn, and bring their plunder of knowledge back home. In a generation we will no longer be dependent on surfaecer generosity.” Yuugi smiled, “not that we are ungrateful."

The Count waved her hand at herself, “I certainly know the desire to be independent. I'll pull some strings with our immigration department."

Yuugi smiled earnestly. "My greatest gratitdue. And I'm sure my entire country agrees."

Yuugi cleared her throat. “And while it is less on the pressing now, I am concerned with soul pollution from the influx of human villagers under your fealty."

The Vampire kept her face passive.

“I'm sure it affects ya too,” Yuugi coughed, “Even one serial killer can well cause enough widespread fear and panic to tarnish a whole crop. Humans are herd animals- I'm sure you've read the latest biological studies? and that means a little carlessness can spread amongst every member of the network. "Yuugi straightened her posture. "You may only need to deal with them for a few decades, but we get the runoff afterward, and uncontent souls can have a half-life of millennia."
Flandre puffed out her cheek. "Of course. We can host a summit at some point. Maybe work out a fear cap and trade system," The Count "But no guarantees; I simply don't have the jurisdiction, you must understand."

Yuugi acted out her best bashful gratitude. "Thank ye for your consideration." They seemed to buy it.

"Now, I know you haven't asked for anything specific in return, but if I may make an offer," Yuugi began....

Yuugi took the stage again, this time,

“Aight ye blighters,” She said, “Aie hope ye ain't pure nick done in, this forenicht, cause ye see tha' peely wally diplomat, o'er thar, frae up 'yonder the hen?"

Flandre stood up and flexed her glinting ornament wings.

“I'ma strum a ditty,” Yuugi said, “Fer 'er lassie,” Yuugi winked at a particularly inebriated Oni who seemed particularly interested in the speech, “'cause the lassies 'r all wae e'er do fer, amirite?”

There was laughter and applause. Yuugi grinned.

Yuugi tapped her foot. the floutists started playing a jaunty ditty to the tune.

And Yuugi sang a song for a scarlet devil's dance-floor.

Flandre grabbed Koishi by the arm and jumped over to the center of the pub, the makeshift, officially sanction dance arena. She smiled sheepishly and tucked a strand of hair behind her head before she turned to face her dance partner.

Koishi only needed a quick breath before she jumped all in, arms and legs and heart and soul.

They danced, wild and free, with no thought about any formal moves, just hands clasped and
untamed motion; spinning, jumping, waving and throwing and holding one another; an untamed revel of rapacious passion, unburdened by pretense.

And once the song ended, Flandre held Koishi in a dip, sweat gleaning off her brow, her mouth in an ecstatic, open-mouthed grin.

Koishi pulled herself up and ran her hand through the shorter girl's hair. Flandre returned the gesture, taking off Koishi’s hat and jumping onto her tiptoes to intercept the kiss.

The crowd cheered, loud and excited, as Flandre and Koishi gazed into each other's eyes in the aftermath.

And then the next song started, and they danced again.
Another Promise to Break

Chapter Summary

This is becoming a 'Black Romantic Dramedy', perhaps.

It was nighttime in a ruined urban alleyway in the place formerly known as Hell. Paper lanterns lit the cracked, overgrown asphalt streets with soft red light. Broken signposts and rusted automobiles dotted the landscape.

Koishi and Flandre walked down the streets. Koishi finished off some meat on a stick they'd bought from a street vendor a few blocks ago. When the mutant vampire came back to Koishi's orbit, the taller girl held out the stick and Flandre took a bite off the end.

Flandre was nearing the end of her energy. Sleep deprivation was setting in, making her walking sloppy and her words slurred and her eyes lidded.

And also she was, what was the oni phrase?- ah yes; 'totally shit-faced.'

"Koishshshshsiihihi," Flandre said, "I- I think, maybe,- and this isn't cause i'm not tough, m'kay?- it's just that I think I need some place to- to lose consciousness for a while."

Koishi chuckled a bit. She was feeling the fatigue, but apparently she was better at fighting through it.

There's," Flandre's lush's blush intensified, "A love hotel, there. I mean, we don't have ta do anything if'n ya don't want," the vampire said, managing to look slightly more composed, "But I'll say this; I'd like to spend the night, with you, even if we just lay next to each other."

Flandre bumped into Koishi's' arms and rubbed her face, with the grease and alcohol and a little bit of drool, onto Koishi's dress, at the collar area. Koishi didn't mind; the taller girl smiled, softly, and ruffled Flandre's hair.

"I- Okay," Koishi said. She checked them into a love hotel.

It wasn't that she didn't want to do it, like, in the abstract; it was that, right now, the idea of having sex with the love of her life physically sickened her. It was, just, that most of the people Koishi had had sex with had been mind-wiped afterwards. It wasn't intimate. It wasn't romantic. And since Flandre was drunk and sleep deprived, it was just as bad, yeah? Flandre didn't have full control of her facilities, so she- she was off limits, tonight.

And, also, Flandre wouldn't even remember it. Normally that worked in Koishi's favor, but now, the thought just filled her with a profound ... emptiness.

Koishi would never do that to the one person she loved.
And, as a side effect of mind-controlling your victims, Koishi didn't actually know if she was, objectively, good at performing sex.

But that was getting ahead of herself. Koishi banished her head of such thoughts. She had maybe four more minutes before Flandre fell asleep, and she was determined to make it a happy four.

Business wasn't too great, but, hey, in former hell, nothing was really too great, economically. Koishi managed to pay with Earth Palace credit. They checked into their room. The room was themed off of some sort of fantasy world, where intricate structures made of crystalline constructs graced curving walls that almost looked like ethereal arteries. It was a little eerie, but hey, it was this one, the 'floating in the middle of space' one, or the bat-fetish one,

"hey, this was fun, yes?" Flandre mumbled.

Flandre lay down on her back on the bed. Her Christmas light wings poked small holes into the mattress; but Koishi could cover the cost. It barely registered.

Koishi could feel herself starting to be forgotten. She poured psionic energy into her concept to forestall the inevitable, at least for a while.

"It was amazing," Koishi said, "But it's over now."

"Yeah, but it'll make some great memories," Flandre said

Tears came to Koishi's eyes. Her heart writhed in its next beat. "D-don't say that,"

Flandre peaked an eye open, and Koishi didn't have to invest so much thought into being remembered. "What? But I mean it; this was perhaps the greatest 76 hours of my life. I'm so glad I met you. But I'm gonna have to go to sleep, now."

"Yeah," Koishi's next breath came choked with a sob. "P-please, can we just do one more thing, together?"

"But- we are the sum of our memories- wasn't this night good enough-"

"I CAN'T ACCEPT THAT!" Koishi yelled.

Flandre was more awake and attentive now. Her mindspace didn't drain any psionic energy.

"I- something's wrong," Flandre said, "I- I'd like to make it right, you now? I really like you."

Flandre flashed a warm smile, her fangs poking out adorably.

"I-" Koishi said. She turned to the wall.

"I didn't want to tell you this, because I wanted this to end happily," Koishi began.

Flandre was unreadable, but more awake. "What are you saying?"

Koishi inhaled. "I can't be remembered. You're going to forget me. You'll think you did this alone."

"What? But- you were the whole reason these nights were so great! our dance, our kisses, when you did whisky shots out of my bellybutton-" Koishi laughed and blushed at that memory, "And
when we pranked the head brewster and when we murdered that tourist- those were so amazing! I'd never forget those things. "

"It's not you. It's-" Koishi pulled her third eyeball into her lap. "It's my mistake. My stupid, irreversible ritual. My curse."

Flandre blinked.

Then she fell back onto the bed.

"Heheh," Flandre laughed, weakly, forlornly, "If its any consolation, at least, even it it weren't for your curse, I'd still probably forget the economic and immigration promises i made to the mayor here."

That failed to get a laugh out of Koishi.

"Koishi," the vampire lifted her head and smiled. It cheered Koishi up, a little. "I promise you, I'll never forget you."

Koishi choked back a chuckle or perhaps a sob. "You- you can't do that. You've broken that before."

"How many times have I broke it?"

"...once." Once too many.

"Well, that's the problem," Flandre refreshed her smile. "I'm more a 'second time's the charm', kind of gal. Here," Flandre pulled a scrap of paper off one of the pamphlets- something about 'Tee-Vee channels'?- and she wrote 'Don't forget Koishi' on it.

"See, even if i do forget, I'll have this paper to remind me. It'll jog my memory."

"I-," Koishi began.

She looked into Flandre's earnest, lovestruck eyes. "I-"

Koishi laughed six pained chuckles and wiped her arms on the floppy sleeves of her dress. "Thank you, Flan," Koishi held her arms out for a hug.

Flandre opted for a kiss. A big, set, sloppy kiss.

And after that kiss, Flandre shut her eyes and slid out of Koishi's arms, onto the bed, and started snoring, slightly. Koishi tucked her into the bed and felt herself become forgotten.
Trying to Open Up

Chapter Notes

A note on the walls we put up to protect ourselves, but all they do is isolate us;

Flandre and Koishi are meant to be written as flawed, power-hungry murderers. For most people, this leads to an inability to form close personal bonds that leaves the person profoundly bitter and unhappy, so, like, don't try this at home. Also, don't kill and eat people.

However, in fiction, female characters are almost never characterized this way. And, as these characters are based off niche fandom interpretations of the leads, I feel like Koishi wouldn't be the one to convince Flandre to stop murdering people. So I'm juggling between exploring the train wreck of toxic powermongering, and trying to put just enough uplifting characterizations to be applicable to real life and also to have a happy ending.

Flandre awoke with a groan. She was hungover. She didn't remember what happened last night. Those two things probably had the same cause.

The mutant vampire looked around, yawning lazily. She was in the palace of the earth spirits—she'd managed to get back here? She last remembered roaming the streets of Former Hell, eating street meat (Did she buy that, or did she just pull off someone's flesh?) - in a guest room; an ascetic little room, with chipped plaster walls and creeping moss along the floor, with an old dresser and, and the red light of the bloated dying hellsun sunrise peaking through a hole in the wall that might not have originally been a window, but now was, functionally.

Also, the maid she had accidentally murdered was propped in the corner, still magically preserved. Flandre felt guilt every-time she saw her; maybe that bender was to try to push those feelings away?

Flandre had a note besides her bed;

--dont ferget Koishi.--

Well, that's what Flandre thought it said at least; she must have scribbled it while drunk.


Nope, didn't sound familiar. Darn.

Flandre stood up and rubbed her head and uncorked her water-skin. She drained it and smacked her lips a few times. Well, hungover or no, she was supposed to find some sort of...

Hmmm, now that she thought about it, she really didn't know exactly what she was doing here.
Some part of her was certain she could find something to help her with her dead maid problem? Buddhists believed in reincarnation, so maybe the satori who ran this place could do some sort of mystic type stuff. Like, re-incarnate someone into their own body- wait, that didn't make sense. Hmmm.

Flandre then realized she didn't bring any treasure. Dang. Maybe she could agree to murder someone in exchange for whatever rez she was hoping for? A life for a life, or something. Something poetic like that.

Flandre ducked her head into the hallway.

"Hello?" said Flandre. Her voice echoed through the empty hallways. Some moss flaked off a crumbling statue.

"Hello," said a woman. Flandre turned to the left-

There was a girl, who looked a little older than Flandre did, with green hair and brilliant green eyes a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow around the base, and a third eyeball, stitched shut, just flopping around.


"Not a lot," said the girl. She shrugged and sighed.

"Oh!" Flandre said. She patted her pockets for the note, but didn't find it in time to make it visual aide. "I'm not supposed to forget a 'Koishi'? Is that like a person or a place or...."

The girl's expression flickered into abject despair, for just a moment. "Sound's familiar. Want me to help you look?"

Flandre smiled and brushed some of her hair behind her ear. "Yeah," she said, "That sounds great."

And they walked through the crumbling sandstone temple, leisurely, and a part of Flandre wanted to forget she had an urgent errand. They talked a bit, and it was nice, and Flandre seemed to forget how Meiling told her to flirt- something about stabbing herself with ice cream? - but as far as Flan could tell, the girl seemed to be into her as well? So, like, what was the next step?

"So you need to bring someone back to life?" said the girl, after Flandre described her epic and noble quest of true philanthropy.

"Yeah," the mutant vampire replied. She looked at the wall. "I kind of, uh, killed her by accident. Taking responsibility, and all that." Flandre smirked. "So that way I can kill her on purpose if and when it suits me, haha."

Flandre forced a chuckle, but the Satori just smiled, gently.

"If I can be," said the girl, "Just a little too honest, but....." She bit her lip.
Flandre, for some reason, was inclined to listen.

The girl continued. "It's okay if you feel guilty, about this one person. We can't always be in control and mistakes don't make you less strong. If you want to show your sensitive side a bit more, I won't judge you."

"Maybe other people, but not me, and I'm not sensitive!" Flandre said, a little less confidently than she wished. She cleared her throat and glared. "And who are you to call me a liar and a mistake-maker! You don't know me!" Flandre clenched her fists and seethed.

"I- I'm sorry," said the girl. She stepped back and her eyes grew wide and she put her hands up. "It was just that- you seemed unsettled, in a familiar way, and I just wanted to help."

"Well, don't."

The girl forced a smile. "Okay. Sorry I crossed a line."

"As long as you don't cross it again," Flandre said. Then she smirked, as she had won the altercation.

There was a period of awkward silence before they got to a pair of decorative, refurbished doors.

"Well, we're here," said the girl. She started to push open the door.

"Oh, okay, cool." Flandre looked around. "So was the Koishi like some sort of soul reliquary? That's what I was thinking."

"Oh no," said the girl. She held out a hand and her smile faded, just a modicum. "I'm Koishi. Charmed, truly."

The two of them entered this big open room with cracks in the ceiling that let in dying sunlight. They approached some sort of twin-tailed death-cat, lounging on a makeshift bed.

Koishi leaned down to whisper to Flandre. "So Rin here ferries souls to the afterlife or something. Or maybe she organizes the souls. Something to do with souls, for sure, so we just need to convince her to help us, and then we've got an in, and then we can restore your..." Koishi pontificated, "Your corpse."

Flandre nodded. "Sounds reasonable."

"I can subtly manipulate her ideas so she wants to help you," Koishi said. "I've gotten good enough that I can just force thoughts into people's heads, though, if I'm short on patience."

"Oh, okay," Flandre said, "So, like, you want me to hold her down while you brainwash her?"

"Oh no," Koishi said, "Rin is also one of my oldest friends."

Flandre smushed her lips together and tried to decide if she should laugh.

Koishi waved to one of her oldest friends. "Hey, Riiimnnn!" She said

Rin lifted her head up and took a puff from her pipe. She blew a smoke ring. "What do you want,
Koishi?

Koishi smiled and talked in a too-friendly manner, that made Flandre laugh.

"Well," Koishi pontificated theatrically, "It's a long story....."
A Third Promise to Break

Chapter Summary

Flandre's quest to resurrect the maid she accidentally killed comes to an end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rin's request involved a couple of things, most of which Flandre didn't mind. Flandre got to spend some time with this 'Koishi' girl- enough time to discover that the green-haired satori was quite cute and funny and absurdly, alluringly powerful beyond all imagining- and Flandre got to spend some time exploring the surrounding parts of Former Hell.

They wandered under the red light of a dying hell-sun along shattered concrete roads. Some rusted metal horseless carriages lay crumbled along the road, and Flandre eventually grew bored of peaking in their windows trying to find something interesting. The buildings thinned out until the only structures in sight were the occasional burned-out farmhouses amid fields of withered crops blighted with something like hell-blight or an equally obtuse, edgy nickname. Oni were not known for coming up with creative names, except for alcohol. And they'd brought a fair amount of sake as supplies; apparently, the alcohol in the sake killed any germs in them, making it safer to drink than the water. Also, what water they did find along the way would occasionally catch fire due to contamination with natural gas, which Flandre thought was, just, totally metal. Okuu explained that, actually, it was only trace amounts of metal-

Oh! And Rin's request also involved some sort of radioactive bird named Okuu accompanying them. It was cool; Okuu reminded her a bit of Meiling, and anyway adventuring parties usually had four people, or so Flandre had heard. It did mean that they were a bit overpowered when facing the random monstrosities along the way.

Finally, Rin's request also involved killing (re-killing?) a buttload of skeletons, so that was fun. She got to show off for Koishi, and Koishi got to show off for Flandre, and some of the skeletons had some fancy looking jewelry or something. One of those was what Rin wanted, but it wasn't very shiny, so Flandre let the Kasha have it.

Koishi finished posing after dispatching the last dozen skeletons. Flandre shot her an impressed glance, and Koishi tipped her magnificent hat and theatrically bowed.

"Riin," Utsuho whined, after the encounter."I got a boo-boo~"

"Oh, you big baby," Rin said. "Come here; I'll make it all better."

Rin rubbed Okuu's head and put a foot on the hell-ravens torso, for leverage, and pulled the rusted sword out of girlfriend's stomach. She dapped at the wound with a handkerchief and smooched
"Okay," Koishi said, "So we completed your request. When can we raise Flan's corpse?"

Rin finished wiping the blood off her chin and blinked. "'Raise'?"

Koishi frowned. "'Resurrect', then. 'Bring back to life'. Whatever language your ritual uses."

Rin blinked again. "Is that what you thought I could do?"

Koishi's ears started wringing, slightly, but she stifled the panic in her stomach. She frowned, but she shot a smile at Flandre before she walked into close quarters with the Kasha and knocked their foreheads together, a little harder than necessary. "You deal with dead people, right?"

Orin smiled, nervously, "Yeah, but just their bodies-

Koishi blinked. "But they have souls inside the bodies."

"They used to."

Koishi frowned. "But, it's just that the bodies don't work anymore. Heart stopped or something. And once you fix that, they're alive."

"It's," Orin took a breath, "It's maybe a little more complicated than that."

Koishi's frown intensified. "But- you talk to them. You don't just fix their mouth muscles or whatever? What do you talk to, if they don't have souls?"

"Uh," Orin glanced askance and sweated, "You- you know you don't need a soul to have a conversation, right? I mean, how would anyone talk to their lawyer, ahaha..."

Koishi wasn't amused. "Then - take us to whoever deals with the souls."

"I don't know any shinigami! They do their own thing, usually before I'm even involved, possibly on another plane of existence."

"But- I promised Flandre I could help her raise a corpse!"

"Was this a promise that she would have forgotten?"

Koishi glared.

The Kasha coughed. "And for the record," Rin said, "I never implied that I could raise or resurrect or even bounce a corpse like a marionette."

"It's true," said Okuu, who had at some point seen the huddle and wanted to be included, "Rin's a terrible puppeteer. Decent ventriloquist though."

"Oh, no," Orin smiled at Utsuho, "That was always just me taking credit for the corpse talking."

Utsuho looked shocked. "Whaa~"

"If the corpse were of a horse, maybe I could beat it until the twitching resembled life...?"

Not even that cheered Koishi up. The satori glared at one of her oldest friends. Orin shirked back,
Then Koishi sighed. "What am I going to tell Flandre?"

"How about the truth?" chirped Utsuho.

The other two youkai shot the hell-raven a look.

Koishi sighed. "I mean, I'm going to have to, right? If you don't have any means of Resurrection?"

"Well, you can't build a relationship without honesty," Okuu chimed in.

Koishi frowned, but not angrily. Overwhelmed with a different emotion, actually. "I tried honesty. Didn't work."

Flandre eyed the fields of blighted crops. She held a hand up, to shield her eyes against the bloated sun, and she idly wondered, if she were a normal vampire, if the hell-sun's light would affect her more than the overworld's sun, would. Huh. Well, at least the red light made her Christmas-light wings look cool.

Koishi approached her, her face full of sorry. "Flandre," she began, "I- I'm really sorry-"

"You can't raise her?" Flandre said. To her surprise, she wasn't angry.

Koishi couldn't make eye contact. "N- no- I'm sorry-"

"Hey, it's not like you promised anything, right?" Flandre said The satori looked even more distraught after she said that. "I- I mean," Flandre rubbed the back of her head. "I appreciate the help anyway. Really."

Koishi turned away. Flandre turned and prodded the corpse of her maid. "I guess I sort of figured I'd have to own up to my mistake, though."

"Sorry you do. It doesn't sound so bad when you put it that way, though? Is that what you're getting at?"

Flandre sighed. "I mean, I don't mind admitting to myself I messed up. The biggest thing is, my sister's going to use this as an excuse for punishing me, forever. Like, I'll literally never hear the end of this. I'll want something, and Remi will be all 'No, Flandre; you killed that maid; you're so irresponsible and violent; go chain yourself in your dungeon."

Koishi didn't laugh at her impression, but Flandre guessed that the older girl wouldn't know how spot-on it was. Flandre coughed.

Koishi scrunched her mouth. "Well, who says you have to tell your sister? Don't maids die in the mansion all the time?"
Flandre paused, and only later wondered why Koishi would know that. "Hmmm. So I can't fix my mistake, but I can avoid all negative consequences for it?"

"I mean- maybe?"

"Hmmm."
Another Funeral

Chapter Notes

So concludes this last arc. It was rather long, but I admit that's because I extended some very simple scenes and put in a bunch of fluff and secondary characters. Hopefully the next arc will have less filler.

Flandre didn't quite remember how she set it up, but apparently she manged to make Margarets death look entirely natural. Still a tragedy, though humans were so frail, so shouldn't they be used to this? Not like Flandre was one to talk.

Because Flandre usually loved funerals. The proximity to death, the absurdity of re-orienting one's routine around a short while of profound mourning, the free food- it usually was something Flandre enjoyed.

And the funeral was as extravagant as could be; a sordid gathering atop a hill under a withered tree. The staff were all there and the villagers who had known Margaret were there and the Youkai from the mansion were all there (Meiling looked good in black, Flandre mused idly), all dressed in their most solemn frowns and tearful eyes and funerary garb. Children clutched thier black umbrellas as the smoggy industrial sky gave way to rain and family members bid their last farwells . Today, right now, Flandre thought that maybe, just a little bit, she could understand the grief these black gatherings inspired. She convinced herself it was just because she failed to bring the maid back to life.

Remilia gave a speech, thanking every one of her maids, not just Margaret, for their service, for their, and for the occasional, regrettable but no less honorable sacrifice. And because Remilia was, just, a huge selfish git, she made the last half all about herself; how she felt it was her personal responsibility for her servant's well-being, how the mansion policies were going to change to protect the staff from accidents, and how the upcoming ball would now be held in the memory of Margaret Puppenshire-McCucheon.

After most of the crowd dispersed, Flandre approached the freshly planted tombstone. She ran her hand along the epithet. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

But then she had to look tough and flippant, because someone she knew was approaching her. "Greetings," Koakuma said.

"Hey yourself," Flandre said. Then she smiled and turned and jumped and hugged the demon. "How's it going, Kuki?"

"My appelation is-" Koakuma began, but she didn't finish. The demona tried to shuffle out of the hug, but Flandre just also wrapped her wings around her. It was probably very uncomfortable, and at least a little pokey, but Kuki could regenerate. Eventually.

"I managed to keep the facade in place for the entirety of your absence."

"Yeah? You kept a perfect, persistent illusion of me up for two weeks?"
"Not precisely. Firstly, it was largely incorporeal, but nobody seemed to notice it wasn't made of
meat. Producing the same olfactory response as you was much simpler, so I doubt Remilia knew
anything was amiss." Koakuma shrugged. "I merely directed it to break various objects and insult
people, during the first day, and once Remilia confined it to your basement, I didn't even have to
manifest it unless someone went to check on you. And most people were too afraid to check on
you."

Flandre frowned, but hey, it wasn't like she could look worse in the eyes of her sister. And it was
good Koakuma understood the importance of cultivating an aura of fear.

"It was actually easier than normal," Koakuma continued, "Even before you left, Remilia had been
nursing this foundling back to health. She was always distracted when she tried to interact with
'you'. Or any of us, for that matter."

Flandre blinked. "That doesn't sound like her at all."

Koakuma frowned. "That is merely because you bring the worst out in her. And you don't actually
need help healing, so there would be no reason for anyone to attempt to nurse you back to health."

Flandre grit her teeth. "You don't know her like I do. This isn't like her. She doesn't do things
unless she can mooch something from it."

"The Lady Scarlet has been very accommodating to Mistress, when her health hits its nadirs."

Flandre wasn't in the mood to argue, but if she were, she might say something about Patchouli (and,
by extension, Koakuma) being free labor to guard the secrets of the mansion, and occasionally
having to tend to Patchi's health was easier than getting a healthier exiled Magician to owe House
Scarlet a favor.

Koakuma coughed. "But it is time for you to hold up your end of the bargain."

Flandre sighed. "Okay, fine; I won't prank Patchi for a whole year. Like, a whole human year.
Won't even go into the library unless I'm escorted by a maid."

"This is sufficient-"

"And that just means I get to prank you, now, Kuki! But only when you get out of bed, since you're
otherwise always in the library."

"This is unacceptable."

"C'mon! You had tons of fun last time we pranked you!"

Flandre didn't notice that she had said 'we', right then. When she thought about it later, she figured
maybe she was using the royal 'we'.

Koakuma shot the vampire the dirtiest look. "I recall being partially dissolved in acid."

"And that wasn't fun?"

"It was not."

"Ugh, fine!" Flandre pretended to pretend to be upset. "I'll find another playmate." She glanced at
the tombstone and her enthusiasm waned. "Well, hopefully. Or maybe I should stick with my
stuffed animals. They don't care if you dissolve or insult or immolate them."
And at this point, a third person approached. "We willl discuss this later-" Koakuma hissed, quietly, before straightening up and talking at a helpful volume about Something Normal. "For what it is worth, you have quite the magnificent craftsmanship on this personal death monument."

"It is indeed quite magnificent," Flandre replied, equally helpful, "So monumentous. Much death."

And Remilia was before them, her hands behind her back and her face serious. "This is a tragedy," said the elder vampire lord.

"Yeah," Flandre said. She wondered if she sould show a little grief, but that might be taken as weakness. She was waiting for Remilia to criticize her lack of remorse, or her lack of empathy, or something, but it didn't happen. Huh.

But the elder vampire only nodded. "I consider this a failing on my part."

"You said as much." Flandre said. "Several times."

Remilia shot her sister a Look. "Perhaps I can inspire you to care as much about the death of one of our staff."

"Oh, no I do," Flandre said. She smiled, "If someone's going to die, I'd rather kill them myself, ahaahaha." Ha, that'll throw Remilia off.

"I- suppose your flippancy in times of despair is understandable."

Flandre blinked. Remi really wasn't going to chew her out?

"I can't help but think that this was fated." Remilia smirked, wryly, "And I didn't even have to manipulate it this time. Aha."

"Aha," Flandre took a breath and figured itd be easier to just take the bait instead of looking for an out. "Why's that?"

Remilia smiled. "Because we have already hired her replacement. It's quite fortuitous, from a certain point of view."

Flandre scrunched her mouth. "Seems that way, huh?"

Remilia didn't follow that up, but she looked expectant. Flandre wasn't going to take any more bait.

"Well, If you both will excuse me." Koakuma said, eventually, "It seems Mistress Patchouli needs some help ambulating back to the mansion. I will take my leave." She bowed and left.

Flandre shot one last grim glance at the tombstone. "I guess I've got a bunch of mischief to cause or something else equally important."

Remilia frowned. "Flandre-"

But Flandre had flown off.
And, among the last of the funeral-goers to leave, forgotten by all, a green haired youkai in the typical morning garb—but with a magnificent black hat and a third eye, just flopping around—skulked away after more than one farewell that no one heard.
The Ball, part 1

Chapter Summary

The first part of Remilia's vampire ball.

Chapter Notes

Welp, I teased this in like chapter 6 and then forgot about it for a while. So here's the first part of the first dance.

Also, Disclaimer: don't take ANY of Flandre's advice here.

The ball was extravagant, but with some overtones of funerary-ness that seemed typical of the interests of an undead corpse with a thing for non-euclidian Gothic architecture and Victorian apparel. (The apparel was Euclidean, mind, but it was also often kind of silly, so sometimes it still hurt your brain to look at.) The Ball had just formally begun, so nobody who was anybody would be caught being not fashionably late. There was a band playing the kind of dirges you could waltz to and Meiling had put up some kind of spotlight so the dancefloor was well lit and some of the surrounding tables were wreathed in comfortable darkness. There was also a buffet in the corner, which is what Flandre was most excited about.

However, a fair deal of the the residents of Gensoukyou were, like, super goth, and enough of those were friends with Remilia. Among the early arrivals, there was the spider youkai who tied random travelers up to eat them, there was the bucket youkai that sat in trees waiting to fall on random travelers to eat them, and there was the apothecary and with her weird rabbit familiar and some other people Flandre vaguely remembered.

Flandre was wearing an elegant red and white dress that twirled when she spun. It was inset with gems the same pattern as her Christmas-light wings, which themselves were decked in gossamer strands like some kind of spiderweb. Her hair was done up in some fancy braids with that nice golden dragonfly hairpin that she'd always liked but didn't remember getting. She looked absolutely adorable, if she did say so herself.

So, Flandre stalked around, happy as could be.

Then she espied someone who she didn't recognize. In the corner of a hallway, off to the side of the main ballroom, was a little girl, human-looking, young-looking, with green bows in the braids that framed her face, staring at the floor, humming some sort of nursery rhyme. She had a serving dish (empty) and a golden pocketwatch, which she kept checking, like she knew she had something to do but didn't want to do it, and was seeing how long she could procrastinate. She had a few bandages around her head and the visible parts of her arm. Flandre had never seen one of their maid's uniforms for someone that young, but it was likely tailored. The girl looked even younger than Flandre did (a whole head shorter, even), and since she also looked human, save for the grey hair, it was likely she was, actually, like, just, super-young.
So Flandre put her hands behind her back and straightened her posture and walked over to that corner of a hallway off to the side of the main ballroom. At first, Flandre thought maybe it'd be fun to mess with her, but then she remembered who the ball was a memorial for-

But it was too late. The tiny maid had already seen her.

"He~ey there~" Flandre said. She kneeled down.

"H-hi." Said the maid, meekly. She looked up, briefly. Then, to the ground, she said, "I like your wings! Oh- uh- did- did you need any- uh- or-dervs?"

Flandre chuckled. "Nah, I mostly eat people, or cookies. Actually-" Flandre frowned. "Did you have anything with strawberries?"

The maid checked her pocketwatch and pulled up the empty serving dish and she- blurred? or something? - and there appeared three crackers with cream cheese and strawberries. Flandre scooped two of them, sequentially, into her mouth, and stuffed them into her face. "omnomnom". It was very messy.

"Mmmgh, these are really good," Flandre said between bites, "You want some?"

"Um- O-okay!" said the girl.

"Oh, I meant that rhet-" Flandre stopped her giggle. She was about the pick the last cracker, but she caught the girl's puppy-dog eyes and her willpower failed her.

Flandre coughed. "Then sure. They're pretty good. Which I just said. Yes."

The girl smiled and took the cracker. It looked bigger in her baby human hands, and she took three bites to eat it.

Flandre coughed again. "So are you new here?"

"Y-yeah," said the girl, "I. Um. I crashed onto the grounds- but then Mistress Remilia helped me get better and she's letting me stay here, and she even gave me a job!"

"Employment is a tool the rich use to subjugate the proletariat," Flandre said, "They give you a paycheck and sell you all sorts of unnecessary luxuries to trade your paycheck for, and once you can't imagine living without the little totchkes money buys, you're dependent on that paycheck, and then they take steps to erode your dignity and identity until-"

It looked like this was going over the maid's head. "Oh. Um."

"Anyway-" The vampire waved the air, "I'm Flandre, and that should be Grand Exalted Mistress Flandre Scarlet, to you, since it's my sister who's hired you."

"Oh! Um," the maid looked at the ground. "Mistress Remilia said not to talk to you...."

Flandre only felt angry for a minute. Of course Remilia wouldn't- whatever. Flandre smiled. "That's just because she's afraid you'll have too much fun with me. C'mon-" Flandre turned to the ball room and beckoned to the girl. "I can give you a rundown of everything you might be unclear on." Flandre then flexed. "And if anyone messes with ya, just let me know, and I'll eat their faces."

Flandre made some theatrical biting motions with her mouth and hands, which seemed to please the maid.
"O-ok, that sounds pretty good," said the maid. "I'm Sakuya, um, by the way."

The ball was still sparse- a few fairies from the forest, the mayor of the human town that paid Remilia tribute, perhaps a stranger in a magnificent black hat- but the staff was here, at least, and Flandre was able to lead her new best friend (patent pending) to some of her other friends.

"So," Flandre said, "Have you met the mage who has asylum in our library?"

"Um, I think so," said Sakuya.

Patchouli wasn't wearing pajamas anymore. It was kind of weird, but the astral pattern on her dress was pretty cool. If she weren't slumped over her table, in the dark, looking tired, she might even look elegant. Koakuma, in contrast, looked really swag in her tuxedo. It was a step above the librarian outfit she usually wore, but it did suit her (haha, get it?) Pretty well since she always had good posture (possibly due to the massive stick up her butt propping her up) and a (questionably deserved) sense of dignity. Though Flandre was willing to bet at least one guest was going to mistake her for a waiter before the end of the ball.

"Hey," Flandre said, "How's your Ball? Are you...." Flandre smirked, "...having a ball?"

Patchouli groaned. Koakuma didn't react. But Sakuya stifled a giggle. Flandre directed her smirk to the maid. It was gratifying, though baby humans were pretty easy to entertain.

Flandre put her hands behind her head and floated, leaning back. "So have you met the coolest maid in the mansion, yet?" She gestured to Sakuya.

The baby human made some nervous sounds.

"It's, 'Sakuya'," said Patchouli, face-down to the table. "Yes."

"I have not, actually," said Koakuma. She held out her hand, stiffly, to the girl. "I did not know humans came that small."

"Oh! Uh," Sakuya took the hand, "The head maid says I'm the youngest they've ever had-"

Patchouli rolled her head so she could look at the rest of the people in the conversation. "Hiring policy's supposed to be '16 and over' for humans. Sakuya was a special exception."

"Actually," Flandre said to the demon, "I think baby humans are just this big when the stork drops them off, and they grow progressively bigger, smarter, and more annoying as they age."

"Interesting," Koakuma said.

"But anyway," Flandre said. She fell back to the floor in a spin, puffing her dress out a little. (She loved that) "Patchi, you should dance!" Flandre said.

Patchouli tensed, visibly. "I don't think that's a good idea-"
"What, because you don't know how?" Flandre said. She raised an eyebrow at Koakuma. "I'm sure Kuki would be able to teach you~"

The math demon blinked a few times and didn't look at the magician. "That- that is actually in my knowledge base, mistress." She looked at her fingers, and said, more softly, "Perhaps you can describe it as a 'personal interest'...."

"Uh," Patchouli said, aghast and confused "...no? I don't dance."

"Do it and you're cool!" Flandre chanted. "Do it and you're cool!"

Sakuya giggled.

Patchouli frowned. "I am familiar with peer pressure, Flandre-"

"Do it and you're average! Do it and you're average!"

Sakuya giggled more, under her hands. Koakuma giggled slightly, before Patchouli looked at her.

"Oh, not you too," Pathcouli said.

"C'mon," Flandre physically plucked Pathcouli out of her chair and propped her up. It was sort of like playing with a stuffed animal, only bigger and more bony.

Koakuma immediately rushed to help her mistress.

"Besides," Flandre said, "It's relatively sparse right now, so there's less people to judge you?"

Patchouli looked contemplative.

"And if it just, turns out to be literally the worst, then it'll make the rest of your life better by comparison."

Patcouli sighed. "Well, I'm already standing up, so why not? Especially if it'll get you to leave."

Flandre winked and elbowed Koakuma, as she left.

And once they were out of earshot, Sakuya tugged on Flandres dress.

"That was nice of you, Grand Exalted mistress Flandre," Sakuya said. She followed Flandre to the next group of people.

"Yeah~" Flandre said. Yep, it was Good Deed Flandre time today. She almost believed herself.
The Ball, part 2

Chapter Summary

Flandre continues to try to be helpful.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ball was starting to pick up. The music was becoming the kind of funeral dirge you could waltz to. And Patchouli did a few minutes of stepping, being led by Koakuma, slowly, gently (and it looked like Koakuma was a bit hesitant to touch her Mistress, so each made dancing more awkward than normal, which was hilarious) and a little ways into the dance Patchouli seemed a little more confident and a little less shaky (those were perhaps a cause and effect relationship, but Flandre didn't know which one came first). After the first spin, showing off the night sky enchanted on Patchi's dress, the magician even cracked a smile.

Flandre coughed. "Patchi enchanted the stars in her dress herself. It would have been a shame if nobody got to see it," she explained.

"Oh, ok." Sakuya said. She still seemed a little nervous about the strangers, and she didn't look at Flandre with quite the adoration Flandre wanted.

Welp. Guess it was time to do more good deeds to impress her friend. (When did Flandre become such a pushover?)

Flandre beckoned for the tiny human to follow her. Sakuya continued to waddle after Flandre as the vampire lord so generously shepherded the human through the ball room full of monsters.

A somewhat young-looking youkai in a tan, wide-sleeved dress bumped into the tiny human, tilting a magnificent black hat and mumbling an 'excuse me' before hustling off.

And then Flandre blinked, and tried to remember what she was doing. Oh, yeah- she'd glimpsed a familiar face at the ball to show Sakuya to-

The groundskeeper was at her own table, alone, slumping over it in a way that Remilia would call unforgivably undignified if Flandre had been doing it. Flandre tried not to think about that, though.

"Hey Mei-Mei!" Flandre said. She waved, theatrically, and jumped over to put an arm around the slumped youkai. "Are you having ... a ball?"

Meiling didn't react to the pun. Sakuya giggled again, though. Flandre smiled at her.

Meiling sighed. "No..."

"Well, before I ask about that; have you met the coolest maid in the mansion, yet?"

"Yes," Meiling said to the table. "I was the one who picked her out of the crater she made in the
"Oh! Ummmm...." Sakuya scrunched her mouth and looked at the wall. Flandre decided not to pursue that line of questioning.

"Anyway," Flandre said, "What's got you down? You're usually so upbeat at these things."

"Im dateless," Meiling said, dejectedly. "When the lady said she'd throw this thing way back when, I thought I could get myself a sweetie by now."

"Nah, that's just an opportunity," Flandre said. She wouldn't admit to something to... so aristocratic? There was some sort of derogatory word for someone who partook in the idolatry of aristocratic values- Flandre was a simple woman, she didn't need a mansion or a title or an army of maids, and the only charms she needed were the wind beneath her wing-joints, a walk through a grassy knoll under an afternoon sun, the warmth of fresh blood around her hands, maybe some freshly plucked wild strawberries....

But even though Flandre wouldn't admit to being so aristocratic, she knew the basics of courtship rituals and even how to waltz and other formal dances, and occasionally she'd found use of them, and right now she was looking to do good deeds.

"It's easy;" Flandre told Meiling, "Just find someone, and ask them to dance. If they say no, then remind them that you work for the hosts, and thus you can threaten to bar her from future balls and in other ways exercise power to inconvenience her."

Meiling blinked. At some point, she had sat up in her chair. "And if that don't work still?"

"Then lie. About anything. Tell them yer the duchess of the moon or something. The odds of meeting them again in any capacity which they will be able to punish you for your deception is negligible, so the consequences for lying approach zero."

"And what if I'm actually trying to make a connection with someone so I don't spend the rest of my existence alone?"

Flandre shrugged. "Then tell the truth, I guess. I don't think there's anything wrong with little exaggerations or lies of omission at first, but if you want to get tied down, then just be honest. Tell em yer just, so lonely, and want to dance, please, with anybody, somebody please hold me."

Sakuya made a giggling noise. Flandre smiled at her.

Meiling looked like he was thinking about it, before she slumped down on the table again. "But that's so hard."

Flandre chuckled. She tapped the shoulder of some random youkai- someone with elemental powers, judging by the accents on her dress. The youkai turned and looked to the vampire, expectantly.

"Have you met Meiling?" Flandre said. She stepped to the side and gestured towards Meiling, who stood up out of her chair immediately and held out her hand.

Flandre absconded immediately, gesturing for the maid to follow her.

"Wow, that was so nice of you!" Sakuya said, once she caught up.

Flandre failed to resist a smile. "Sure."
Looks like Good Deed Flandre strikes again.

Chapter End Notes

Still trying to get back into the writing groove, so the Ball should be concluded in one or two additional short chapters.
The Ball, part 3

Chapter Notes

Again, Flandre is not a role model.

Sorry for this becoming a bit of a social satire, for this arc.

And then the ball began in earnest. It still wasn't time for the fashionably late people to arrive (the more bloated a head an attendant had, the later they'd get here), so Remilia still hadn't made an appearance.

Sakuya, however, had started hiding behind Flandre, clutching parts of the vampire's dress with her little hands. "There's," Sakuya said, "There's a lot of people...."

"Are you nervous?" Flandre asked. She herself was never nervous. Never. Nope.

"Yeah...." Sakuya sighed at the ground, her face almost as adorable as Flandre's. She wasn't vain, but she didn't see the need to be humble.

Flandre tried to shoot Sakuya a reassuring smile. "You wanna know my secret?"

"Ummm."

"The trick is," Flandre said. She pontificated with her right hand. "To not think of most of them as people. They're just pitiful maggots who you are allowing to amuse you while they are in your presence."

"Oh. Um." Sakuya looked at the ground.

Flandre tilted Sakuya's head up, to sell the pitch. "Once you see them as beneath you, you will have no room for fear in your heart, because it's all replaced by hate. You won't care if anyone laughs at you or looks down on you, because their opinions are dumb, and they're dumb. Why are you listening to dumb people?" Flandre pontificated rhetorically. "You don't, that's why. It's like, you don't care what ants think of how your feet smell when you step on them, so if someone tries to hurt your feelings, you shouldn't pay them any mind, and you shouldn't be worried about telling them anything."

"But- some of them are so cool," Sakuya said.

"Nah, they only look cool. Are you looking at Yuugi?"

Flandre recalled- vaguely, not quite enough, really- promising some sort of economic treaty with the oni mayor, on behalf of the Scarlet Devil Mansion. But, hey, she could confront the sack of muscles in the shape of a demon so Sakuya would think she was cool. Not that she cared about any of that.

Sakuya looked again over at Yuugi Hoshiguma and her oni entourage. "Y-yeah. They look impressive."
Flandre refreshed her recalcitrant smirk. "Nah, She's a huge nerd. She plays the guitar. And she has a funny accent, which implies she's dumb."

"Is she?"

"Not really, but you'll probably only see her, like, once every few years, so feel free to think that, if it makes you feel better."

Then Yuugi saw them approach. "Eyy, Dame Flandre, Guid evenin! It's been dunky's, Ay?" She winked.

Flandre assumed that was some sort of greeting. "'Sup, Yuugi? Yes it has. Are you having a ball, yet?"

Yuugi blinked, then she burst out laughing. She slapped her knee. "A'm enjoin' tha wine, pro gradis, fer sooth!"

"Ahahaha, yes, indeed. Flandre said. "So did you get your, uh," Flandre pontificated, "Trade agreements worked out?"

"'fraid it aint so; tha Mistress o' this 'ere establishmen' aint peeked 'er face, yet."

"Yes, well, my sister doesn't have a sense of urgency when other people are involved. Let me get the mayor of the pitiful human town we collect tribute from. I'm sure they have enough social institutions to accomodate your economic needs."

That way, Remilia wouldn't get mad at Flandre for negotiating on the mansions' behalf. Genius.

"And I'll leave you in the company of our most fearsome maid;" Flandre bowed and pontificated towards Sakuya. Sakuya flinched. "Unless you want more of my mentorship....?" Yeah, it might not be good to leave her alone, if she was nervous. But like, baby birds or bird themed yokai learn to fly by being pushed out of the nest, and only some of them ended up getting eaten. Humans were basically birds, was what Flandre was getting at.

"Oh, um." Sakuya looked at her hands. Flandre had thought this might be good, for her to get over her nervousness, but if she wasn't up for it. It probably took her a bit by surprise, but she was spontaneous like that, and Sakuya was going to have to learn to be more independent sooner or later. Sooner, if she didn't want to end up relying on Remilia too much.

"I think I'll be fine," Sakuya said, eventually.

Yuugi feigned being scared when she introduced herself to the tiny human. Which probably meant she was trying to be nonthreatening, which meant she was likely not a threat. Oni didn't lie; after all; that's why their politics actually worked. And Flandre didn't think Oni ate humans, and if they did, it probably was only humans with a high blood alcohol content, but she flexed her wings to keep an eye on Sakuya through the reflection in her ornaments, anyway.
It wasn't hard to find one of the few humans in the ball. Flandre just followed the sound of unsolicited, aggressive compliments about supposed tastiness to a timorous human in a long overcoat. Humans got bothered by the cold more than most Youkai, Flandre noticed.

It didn't take a lot of persuading the human mayor to agree to open up trade negotiations with Yuugi. Flandre gave credit to her smile.

And Sakuya seemed to be doing fine, alone. Maybe she'd grow more confident out of this.

Yuugi pulled out some hide-bound folders filled with economy things, probably and she tried to drop her accent. What a nerd, trying to improve the living conditions of her constituency in the middle of a party.

Flandre flew over to her new favorite human. "Sorry for leaving you alone; I was trying this 'sink or swim' thing. If it was too much, I won't leave you alone anymore."

"Oh!" Sakuya cogitated for a while. "No, it was fine. I mostly didn't understand what she was saying, but, uh," Flandre rubbed the back of her head, "She did say I looked like I'd grow up to be very nutritious, and I felt kind of uncomfortable."

"Oh." Flandre was pretty sure she could take Yuugi in a fight, if it came down to it. "On behalf of all Youkai, I'm sorry that happened. But, I mean, if you're human, that's just something you've gotta deal with," Flandre scrunched her mouth, "Strange Youkai will tell you how tasty you look or ask to have you for dinner, when you're walking down secluded mountain paths or through magical forest groves. Most of the time it's just a power play, and some people (like Yuugi there) probably think they're being friendly, so don't let it get to you."

"Did you really understand what she was saying?"

"Yeah, that was Japanese. Just with the oni accent."

"Oh. I guess, it seemed like you were winging it, a little."

Flandre chuckled and shook her left wing, tinkling the ornaments and the drapings that adorned it. "Well, I do enjoy winging things."

Sakuya put her free hand to her mouth and giggled.

"But yeah; first she said it had been a while, then she said she was enjoying the free alcohol, then when I asked how far she'd actualized her policy promises, she noted that Remilia wasn't here, so I gave her a more relevant authority to negotiate with."

"Wow!" Sakuya scrunched her mouth and thought, for a bit. "But maybe you just knew what she was saying in advance? How well do you know her?"

"We've met a few times before. Just last month, actually I, I, uh," Flandre rubbed the back of her head. She probably shouldn't tell the new maid about her role in the demise of a previous one (But hey, Margarate got a ball in her honor, so small consolation). "Just visited the place formerly known as Hell to party for a bit."

"Wow! That sounds amazing, getting to go all these cool places!"

"Well, it wasn't strictly a sanctioned visit." Flandre tapped her nose. "But if I'm disregarding every
rule, that just means there's no reason I couldn't take you, if you wanted."

"Really?" Sakuya's eyes sparkled. "You're so cool, Flandre!"

Flandre couldn't resist a smile. "Hey, what'd I say about looking down on cool people?"

"I think that might be hard for me. I don't want to look down on you and Koakuma and Lady Remilia-"

"Remilia's not that cool." Flandre interjected. She failed to keep the annoyance out of her voice. "She's too absorbed in her image and her status, at the expense of others, to merit respect."

"Is she?" Sakuya looked around. "I guess I only just met her. She seems nice, though!"

Flandre tried to keep her face neutral. "Doesn't she?"

Flandre was silent for a bit, staring off into the distance. Afterwards, she'd worried that she was silent for too long, and that it might have made Sakuya worry.

But then they were approached by a strange woman, looking a little older than Flandre looked, with an elegant green dress like flowing chakras and a magnificent black hat, adorned with a yellow ribbon.

"Good evening, Lady Scarlet," the stranger bowed.

Flandre blinked. Then she smirked and bowed back. "That is my title, yes, but I don't stand on formality. Call me 'Flandre'."

The stranger smirked. "Well, Flandre, you are the most beautiful lady here. I could not forgive myself if I didn't at least ask for a dance." The woman held a hand out. "Would you oblige a mysterious stranger?"

Flandre hesitated, which may have come off as apprehension. Very uncool.

Sakuya tugged on Flandre's dress. "Remember," she whispered, "You don't care about the ants beneath your feet, so don't be nervous to tell her anything."

Flandre patted Sakuya's head and stood up straight, turning back to the stranger. "Well, I suppose it might be fun, a little dance, then?"

For a moment, the stranger looked relieved? Or something? But she hid it under a vernier of confidence, and she followed Flandre to the dance floor.

And, luckily enough, the next song the band played was a fast ditty.

And Flandre decided, what the Former Hell, she could have some fun here. And looking cool in front of Sakuya was a bonus.

Flandre only needed a quick breath before she jumped all in, arms and legs and heart and soul. She had intended for this to be a formality, an excuse to show off, but the stranger knew how to dance, it seemed, but was also carefree enough to disregard the implicit structure of the art.

They danced, wild and free, with no thought about any formal moves (but with the occasional interjection of real dance structure), hands clasped and untamed motion; spinning, jumping, waving and throwing and holding one another; an untamed revel of rapacious passion, unburdened by pretense.
And when song ended, Flandre was holding the stranger in a dip, sweat glistening off her brow, her mouth in an ecstatic, open-mouthed grin.

The stranger pulled herself up and smiled and nodded towards the vampire. Flandre returned the gesture.

Sakuya clapped, excitedly, from the sidelines.

"Well," Flandre said. she ran her hand through her hair, partially to wipe some sweat from her brow. "That was more fun than I anticipated. Shall we introduce ourselves now? Maybe do it again?"

And the stranger looked a little forlorn. "I think- that might not be the best idea."

Flandre's spirits sank, a bit. "Oh." Then she thought something that made her spirits rise, again. "I guess I could just ask around to find out the secret identity of this dashing mysterious stranger."

The stranger looked pleasantly surprised. She smirked, "Well, hat's off to you if you do manage that."

"Challenge accepted." Flandre refreshed her smirk. "I mean, you're not even wearing a mask; isn't that the first step of being a mysterious stranger?"

"My mask is a social construct," said the stranger.

They blinked at each other before sharing a final laugh. The stranger departed, theatrically.

Flandre turned back to Sakuya. She floated towards the tiny human.

Then she blinked. What had she been doing?

"You're a good dancer," Sakuya said.

"Yes-" Flandre waved the air. "That's how you dance. Admittedly, you'd want to do with a partner, but I think I showed you the moves, well enough."

"But," Sakuya furrowed her brow. "Didn't you have a partner?"

Flandre blinked. She- well, she wasn't crazy, and she should trust her memories, and she didn't remember that. Maybe she'd pulled a passerby in for a swing or a dip. Or maybe she'd split herself and danced with her duplicate? That seemed a little desperate, though, and half the time she forgot she could do that.

After a few moments where Flandre didn't answer, Sakuya fidgeted. "I guess it must have been my imagination."
The Ball, concluded

Chapter Notes

So I thought I had a bit more to say during the ball. Like, more terrible social advice from Flandre, more cute moments from baby Sakuya, some social satire, or at least more fluffy moments between the two characters that this fic is supposed to ship. Alas, writers block struck, and I suppose I can just add another ball scene later, with subtle differences indicative of character growth.

Also, since I'm not being canon in this dark fantasy murder world, I think Flandre and Remilia's wingspans are large enough to sustain actual flight; e.g., 6.8 meters. I guess the descriptions also work with the canonical cute, little wings, though.

And then the ball unofficially began, a good hour or two after it officially did. The horizon had comfortably shaken off the last solemn scintilla of twilight and begun the night in earnest, with all the stars and nightbugs and shit. Like, if anyone had any night-time based buffs, they would definitely be in effect now.

And the music slowly died down, to discourage dancers from the floor. For those too determined and/or inebriated to take the hint, maids escorted, sometimes bodily, them to the tables at the edges of the hall.

Then every outdoor window opened, allowing a tittering murder of bats to swarm about the hall, snuffing out torches and other light sources at the edges of the room, until only the center of the dancefloor was illuminated.

And Remilia coalesced from the swarm, posing extravagantly, her arms up and her wings out taking up the maximum amount of space. She was smiling, imperiously. It was sort of cool, the whole performance. Flandre supposed she could admit that.

Remilia was wearing an elegant evening dress, all pearlescent with little specs of ground sapphire that sparkled in the corner of your eyes. She wore bicep-length opera gloves and a platinum crown, and her hair was washed and feathered but otherwise undecorated. A team of maids had spent a lot of effort painting an elaborate monochrome mural across the length of her draconic wingspan. Some ancient tale of heroism or maybe something religious. The point was that it would get people to ask about it, so Flandre determined she would not.

Remilia thanked everyone for attending the Puppenshire-McCucheon memorial ball. The vampire lord gave a speech—something bland and noble, flattering the most decadent of the guests, and she barely mentioned the maid whom this ball was, ostensibly, a memorial for—keeping her fake smile the whole time. She didn't pause talking when she saw Sakuya, and Flandre besides her, but her head stopped turning, and she shot Flandre just the barest hint of a disapproving glare.

Flandre gulped, and tried not to let it get to her.

And after the speech, Sakuya clapped, excitedly, after tucking her serving tray under her armpit.

"Wow, Mistress Scarlet is so cool!" Sakuya said.
Flandre scrunched her mouth to the side. "Remember what I said about her; too obsessed with her status and such."

"Her dress is so pretty!" Sakuya said. She seemed enamored.

Idly, Flandre looked down at her own dress. Hers was comfortable, and it was in her favorite colours, and it poofed out when she spun. She was OK if other people didn't like it; they were just ants and maggots. And it made sense that Remilia would get the best dress. Remilia was the hostess, after all.

Then they turned around, and they were shadowed by a great pair of decorated wings.

"What are you doing?" Remilia asked. Her voice had a tinge of menace in it.

Flandre smiled. "Just enjoying the ball-"

"Sakuya," Remilia interrupted. She never even turned her head to her sister, "I thought I talked to you about the dangerous people in the mansion. How you should try to avoid them, for your safety."

Sakuya blinked. Then she looked sheepish. "I guess I forgot." Her eyes then brightened and she clutched her serving platter. "But your sister's so cool!"

Flandre tried to seem nonchalant. "No, I'm not-"

"No she's not," Remilia stated. Flandre frowned.

Sakuya looked between the vampires, nervously. "Um...."

Remilia kneeled down and put on a better smile than Flandre's. "Now, Sakuya, would you like to accompany me for the rest of the evening? I'll give you the rundown of everything you might, perhaps, due to hasty explanations and through no fault of your own, be unclear on."

Sakuya looked towards Flandre. "Ummmm...."

Remilia put her hand on Sakuya's shoulder and she started leading the tiny human towards a table containing a trio of Youkai. "Now, Satori and I have been old friends; you can practice your etiquette with them."

It was probably just as well that Remilia introduced Sakuya to Satori and her entourage. Alone. Flandre seemed to recall having been acquainted with Rin and Okuu, but she didn't quite remember how or why.

Sakuya shot one last look back at Flandre, which meant that Remilia remembered her presence. Flandre decided she could forgive the maid, just this once.

Because Remilia caught the glance, and she looked to Flandre, and smiled that fake smile of hers, forged from malice and dripping with sarcasm. "Flandre," Remilia said, "I'm sure you can find a more constructive use of your time, if you do insist on attending this ball?"

Flandre sighed. "Of course, sis."

"Do try not to embarrass the family name, whatever you get up to."

Flandre sighed again. "Yes, sis."
And the little maid looked concerned. How quaint, but Flandre decided she could spare a moment to appear like all was well.

"Oh, dear sister," Flandre bowed, stretching her wings out as she did, "I'm used to flying solo. I'm sure, this rest of the evening, I'll just have... a ball."

Sakuya giggled. Remilia put her hand to her mouth. If Flandre didn't know better, she would have through she heard a chuckle.

"Right then," Remilia said. "Carry on." She led Sakuya away.

Flandre took one last look at the ball and turned towards the exits.

Right as Flandre was about to leave the dance floor, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"May I have this dance?" said a woman. A youkai, looking a little older than Flandre looked, pale green hair and striking green eyes, wearing a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow and a tan dress with wide sleeves. She had a third eyeball, stitched shut, just flopping around.

Flandre tried to refresh her devil-may-care grin, but it felt like it came short. "I don't think I'd be too fun to dance with, right now. Sorry."

The stranger didn't looked put off, though. "Well, do you want to raid the food buffet with me?"

Now that, Flandre felt up for. Maybe she and this stranger would get along.

So together they stalked up to the rows of pastries and sweets and strawberries- turned out they both loved those- and they traded stories and doubts and chuckles and eventually names. The stranger's name was Koishi.

"Is that a very common name?" Flandre asked.

Koishi pondered for a moment. "I don't think so. Why?"

Flandre shrugged. "I dunno. It just feels like I've met someone with that name before.

Koishi's subsequent expression was inscrutable. Then she shook her head. "Anyway, don't worry about your sister. They're always jerks; I should know, haha." Koishi downed the last of her punch. "And a lot of it's just power play. Don't let it get to you."

Flandre nodded. She knew that, sort of, but it was nice hearing it confirmed. "Yeah, sorry for going off like that. I promise I'm usually pretty cool."
"Hey, anytime; it's fine." Koishi smirked. "Though perhaps I'll need a little convincing of that last bit."

Flandre raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You'll want that dance now, then? I'm sure we'll be able to have a ball."

Koishi's expression slackened. She stared.

Flandre coughed.

Then Koishi refreshed her smile. She held out her hand, and, as luck would have it, the band started playing a tango.

And it was fun; they danced, wild and free, with no thought about any formal moves, just hands clasped and untamed motion; spinning, jumping, waving and throwing and holding one another; an untamed revel of rapacious passion, unburdened by pretense.

And once the song ended, Flandre held Koishi in a dip, sweat glistening off her brow, her mouth in an ecstatic, open-mouthed grin.

"See?" Flandre panted, "I'm quite cool, I'll have you know." She pulled Koishi up.

"Colour me corrected," Koishi said.

"So, uh," Flandre said. She rubbed the back of her head. "I can think of some other cool stuff to do, out of this stuffy little dance hall. Would you care to join me?"

And Koishi looked a little forlorn. "I think that maybe, that might not be the best ide- Oh, what the hell." Koishi held her hand out. "Lead the way, cool one."
Awakenings: Green Side

Chapter Summary

Koishi awakens. Note the multiple definitions of the word 'awaken'.

Chapter Notes

And here's the new arc. I anticipate, eventually, to have several arcs about Sakuya, where she's a teenager and then an adult, which meant I could have named this "Sakuya Part 1: Part 1:....." but that might be a little too ahead of where I've planned out.

EDIT: now that I've renamed this ark, this could have been "Sakuya Part 1: Part 1: Awakenings: Green Side", which was excessive even for me. But anyway, we're going to see how Sakuya affects Flandre and Koishi in the next bunch of chapters.

Also, I'm taking liberties with Sakuya's power set and past. Sorry if I offend.

Somewhere in that labyrinthine, non-euclidian hall-matrix of the Scarlet Devil Mansion, there stalked a young-looking youkai, with light green hair and green eyes and a magnificent black hat with a yellow bow and a third eye, just flopping around.

Koishi may have, when nobody was looking, barred her teeth and let her wrists go limp and flailed her hands in front of her, and she pretended to be some sort of horrible, sneaky monster. Or at least, a more overt horrible, sneaky monster.

However, eventually the satori found a plain mahogany door, at the corner of a side-alcove next to a big gothic statue of some sort of religious figure. (Koishi doodled a mustashe on it, in her blood, since she couldn't find a marker.)

The maids quarters were mostly sparse, with rows of bunk beds between some chests and wardrobes. It was more like a barracks than a living room.

Koishi floated through the beds, gazing at all the mortal heads on small pillows, but none of said pillows held a silver-haired human child. Koishi figured finding the youngest maid would be easy (it'd be the shortest lump under the covers), but she didn't consider that maybe Flandre's new friend would be in a different room. In retrospect, it was a glaring oversight.

Luckily, though, one of the maids turned out to be both a light sleeper and completely nonplussed about a strange youkai stalking through the quarters in the middle of the night.

"If you're here to steal things," said the nonplussed maid, sleepily, as she rubbed her eyes, "The vault is in the deepest dungeons, past the great iron doors behind the grand hallway. We've got a pretty scary monster guarding it, though."
Koishi resisted the urge to laugh. "There is indeed a great treasure in that dungeon, but I'm not here for that, tonight." Koishi examined her hand. "No, I'm here for a more petty reason. There is a maid- younger than I've ever seen from you. Silver hair. 'cute' eyes. Idealism unfettered by this cold, harsh world."

"Well, as for the being young with silver hair," said the maid, "You might be thinking of Sakuya Izayoi. She's new. And permanent, rather than us here on our 2-15 year sentences, so she'll be in one of the guest rooms upstairs."

Koishi smiled and tipped her hat. "Well, thank you then, miss."

"Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Here;" Koishi waved her hand in front of the maid's face. "I'll leave you with some sweet dreams. Probably."

The maid slumped backwards. Koishi adjusted the maid's blanket, and then she left the room, and then it was another quick trek through that labyrinthine, non-euclidean hall-matrix of the Scarlet Devil Mansion, except this time with less pretending to be a horrible monster. Not pretending anymore; it was time to stop lying about herself.

Sakuya's room was the third guest room on the right side of the main hallway on the second floor, Koishi discovered, eventually. It wasn't very well furnished, though there was a collection of rocks on the dresser, and an impromptu medical station at the far corner. it was dark, with slight moonlight slivers peaking in through the curtains, and the room smelled slightly of antiseptic and gauze. And a human; Sakuya was sleeping, fitfully, in the bed, under a thick red blanket.

Koishi crept over, completely silently. She wouldn't go in for the kill just yet.

So this was Flandre's new friend.

How dare she.

Koishi flexed her fingers on her right hand and reached out-

And the human opened her eyes, completely, abruptly. Two wide, 'cute', blue irises, stared at her, unblinking.

"I remember you," said the girl.

Koishi blinked. "Do you really?"

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side. Children seemed to be better able to remember her, but not by much; if Sakuya had managed to get through REM sleep, she'd forget everything. Koishi considered maybe coming back in ninety minutes, but no; better to get this over with now. She could make everyone forget this little monkey over the course of the rest of the night.

"All the more reason to get rid of you," Koishi said, ignorin whatever the girls response was. She sent energy through her hand.

And the next thing Koishi knew, the human blurred, and the satori's throat had been slit. Green blood trickled down her chest. It was annoying, because she'd have to regenerate before she could start asking questions.

Koishi blinked.
And the human was on the bed, in a combat stance, with a knife in her right hand and a golden pocketwatch in her left. She glanced at the watch, occasionally, protectively.

So that made Koishi's next move obvious. She only managed to grab the watch for a half a second, though, before her right forearm erupted in cuts as the tendons that kept her fingers clutched were severed.

The human plucked the watch before it hit the ground. "Please don't; That's very sentimental to me," said the child.

Koishi frowned. "So it's not the watch," Koishi wondered aloud, once her throat healed. She sounded a little more gravely than before, but she'd rushed the regeneration a bit. It was fixable. Later.

This lunge, Koishi made to grab the human directly-

And she missed, obviously; the human blurred, and suddenly, there were hot knives flying out of the middle of thin air from above and behind and to the side of her.

After every volley, the human would appear, on the bed, or the dresser, or in the windowstill. Koishi blasted open the window, and the human clutched her elbows as the cold blew in. That she was wearing a silk nightgown probably didn't help. The cold air slowed Sakuya's reaction time, but the human fought valiantly even in the cold.

So Koishi did more lunges, and more knives appeared out of midair. The last volley were hot, even, searing the flesh around the wounds.

However, the tiny human was inexperienced, and eventually, predictable, and Koishi caught hold of a thin, mortal forearm.

And Koishi had to blink. She kept her grip, though.

The room looked like it had been put through a sort of color-blindness filter, with the reds turning grey and the greens turning yellow and the purples disappearing into blue- It was cold, and Koishi’s grunts were muted and she felt herself floating-

Koishi had lived for a long time, and hadn't ever experienced anything like this. She had mixed emotions about that. She glanced out the opened window and saw the horizon, with these strange eyes, so alien yet subtly familiar, like stirred nostalgia through an icy mirror as and a madwoman played an organ, incorrectly, in the background-

Oh, also, the human was sawing through her hand tendons. Koishi's grip fell apart and Sakuya kicked herself free.

As soon as the human left Koishi's touch, the world went back to its familiar, boring pallet and timbre.

And there were more knives. Like, holy Yukari, there were a lot of knives, in her body. Sakuya seemed to reuse them if they fell out, so Koishi started just leaving them in.

Eventually, Koishi sighed. "Fine, then; I'll stop trying to kill you."

Sakuya clutched her current set of knives a little more defensively. "Will you?"

Koishi waved a bloodied arm with a limp hand in front of Sakuya's face. "You're going to forget
Sakuya blinked. "No."

Koishi blinked. Then she lunged again, grabbing towards Sakuya's face. "YOU'RE NOT IN ANY POSITION TO REFU-"

Sakuya blurred, and appeared on the dresser. There was another volley of knives.

"I'M GOING TO-"

Sakuya dodged again. And Koishi figured out her dodging patterns, by this point, so the knives that appeared out of thin air started missing more often.

"YOU KNOW WHAT- you actually know what?" Koishi said. She relaxed her stance.

Sakuya paused for a moment. Someone should probably tell her about the dangers of curiosity.

Then Koishi sighed, another time. "You're not a violent person," she said, taking a gander. She wiggled her remaining functioning fingers in Sakuya's face. "Or at least, you don't want to be."

Sakuya slowed, but her eyes were still focused, and her knives were still at the ready. She clutched her watch, tightly.

"This was self defense- you were right about this. So that means there's no reason to keep doing this." Koishi made her voice a little sing-song when she spoke. She didn't need to be in physical contact, since she wasn't brainwashing; just sussing out subconscious motivations.

The human stopped. She looked intent.

"You're happy being a maid. And good maids don't continue eternal knife fights with unkillable mythical beings."

Sakuya lowered her stance. She glanced at her pocketwatch one more time. Then she waddled over to the corner, where all the medical supplies were. She pulled out a set of bandages and turned to Koishi. "Are you okay?" said the maid. She held out a bandage, her arms outstretched all the way, her eyes wide. It was a little adorable, Koishi had to admit.

Koishi waved an arm with a limp wrist, since her tendons hadn't reknitted yet. "I'll be okay." She took a breath, then turned to the maid. "So, you can stop time?" she said, conversationally.

"I mean, theoretically," said the girl. She shrugged, "And only from my frame of reference, but doing that adds a lot of complications. I cheat a little."

Koishi tried to think of a few questions, to suss out a weakness in the human's powerset. But then she remembered she was trying to be diplomatic, right now.

"So Flandre's your new friend, then?"

"Yeah, she's so cool!"

"And she's happy?"

"I- I don't know yet." Sakuya looked at the floor. "I know grown-ups like to hide their feelings when they're unhappy."
Koishi sighed and nodded. "True, true."

And then they talked, a bit, for a bit; Koishi becoming a little less guarded, but still mostly guarded. She didn't feel bad, though, because Sakuya dodged every question about her past.

And Sakuya hadn't known Flandre for very long, so Koishi couldn't pick her brain for Flandre's secret feelings. So this night was mostly a wash.

Koishi stood to leave.

"S-see you later!" Sakuya squeaked. She waved from her bed, after crawling back into it. "What was your name, again?"

Koishi didn't refute the first part. She smiled and tipped her hat. "Call me Koishi. Charmed, truely."

And after Sakuya closed her eyes, Koishi waved her hand again, and the human forgot all about her.
Awakenings: Red Side

Chapter Summary

Now, for something really similar, but also completely different.

Chapter Notes

Flandre is not a role model. Well, not 100% one. Not yet, at least.

Somewhere in that labyrinthine, non-euclidian hall-matrix of the Scarlet Devil Mansion, there stalked a mutant vampire, blond and young-looking with Christmas-light wings. She couldn't sleep, not tonight, and after having given it a good faith effort for an hour or two, she decided to do something fun. Get a really, really early start to the day.

Flandre may have, when nobody was looking, barred her teeth and let her wrists go limp and flailed her hands in front of her, and she pretended to be a dinosaur. Rawr rawr!

However, eventually the vampire found a plain mahogany door, at the corner of a side-alcove next to a big gothic statue of some sort of religious figure, with a moustashe doodled on it in blood. Flandre giggled and wondered who did that; she added a giant nose and glasses.

The maids quarters were mostly sparse, with rows of bunk beds between some chests and wardrobes. Flandre always thought it was more like a barracks than a living room.

Flandre stretched her wings and skipped in mid-air along the beds, gazing at all the mortal heads on small pillows, but none of them held a silver-haired human child. Finding the youngest maid would be easy (it'd be the shortest lump under the covers), but she didn't consider that maybe her new friend would be in a different room. In retrospect, it was a glaring oversight.

Luckily, though, Flandre knew that one of the older (nd thus more knowledgeable) maids wouldn't mind if she was woken up in the middle of the night.

"Hey, are you awake, Millicent?" Flandre said. She poked a sleeping human.

Millicent rubbed her eyes. "I had the wierdest dream; I had a family, and I had managed to retire early, and I was starting to get good at my hobby-"

"The Job might take your time and your will and your soul, but it will never take your dreams," Flandre said. She nodded, sagely.

The maid did the best bow she could, half-under the covers. "So why aren't you guarding our treasure vault, Mistress Scarlett?"

"I didn't see Sakuya here? She's the new maid; Silver hair. 'cute' eyes. Idealism unfettered by this cold, harsh world."
"Well, I don't know about those last parts," said the maid, "But Sakuya Izayoi is housed in one of the guest rooms, upstairs, since she's here for life, supposedly."

"The ultimate wage-servitude," Flandre shook her head. Then she looked Millicent in the eyes and smiled and nodded. "Well, then, thank you, maid."

The maid rubbed her eyes again. "Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Physiologically? Probably not; it'll take a few minutes."

"Dang," said Millicent, sleepily. She sunk under her covers.

"Well, sweet dreams." Flandre left.

Then it was another quick trek through that labyrinthine, non-euclidean hall-matrix of the Scarlet Devil Mansion. Flandre pretended to be a different kind of dinosaur, this time.

Sakuya's room was the third guest room on the right side, Flandre discovered, eventually. It was rather unkempt, despite being very sparse, though there was a collection of rocks on the dresser, and an impromptu medical station at the far corner, and some sort of green blood all over the floor. Did Sakuya bleed green blood? Huh. The scent of iron mingled with antiseptic and gauze.

And there was Sakuya, on the bed, sleeping fitfully, under a thick red blanket. She shivered, a bit; turned out the window was a little open, so Flandre closed it all the way.

Flandre chuckled behind her hand and crept over to the side of the bed.

"WAKE UP SAKUYA!" Flandre yelled.

Sakuya bolted upright. "AHHHHHHHHHHH!-

"YOU'VE BEEN ASLEEP FOR A MILLION YEARS! EVERYONE YOU'VE EVER CARED FOR IS DEEEAAAADDDDDD~" Flandre clutched her face.

Sakuya hurriedly pulled out a golden pocketwatch and flipped it open and blinked at it. She closed it with a sigh, then she chuckled, forlornly. "Well, you're not completely wrong."

Flandre paused her pantomime. She cleared her throat. "So now that you're awake, do you want to go play?"

"I- I have work," Sakuya said.

"'Work' is a lie the rich use to subjugate the poor," Flandre said, "So c'mon, let's go play!"

"Umm...."

"C'monnnn~" Flandre said. She flopped over Sakuya's bed, careful that her wing ornaments didn't cut anything. "Let's go plaaaay~"

"Ummm." Sakuya said. She flipped the cover off her pocket watch, quickly, idly, and glanced at it
briefly. "Remilia likes to be the one to wake me up, so I should stay here for the next two hours and 43 minutes."

Flandre sat upright and put on a serious face. "Well, you could always come back before the dawn."

Sakuya scrunched her mouth and cogitated.

Flandre continued. "So I noticed you don't have any stuffed animals. This is a travesty, for a young girl. Let's go get you one."

"I- I guess, if we come right back...."

"Cool!" Flandre pulled Sakuya out of the covers.

"Ok, just let me change out of my pajamas," Sakuya walked over to the dresser.

"Patchi walks around in her pajamas all the time," Flandre said.

Sakuya pulled some clothes out of the bottom drawer of her dresser and turned to Flandre and smushed her mouth. "Turn around, please?"

Flandre spun on her left foot with her arms and hands outstretched.

There were a few moments of rustling. "Okay, you can turn back around, now," Sakuya said.

Flandre spun on her left foot with her arms and hands outstretched again. Sakuya was wearing her maid outfit, and she walking to the door.

"Do you have any other clothes?" Flandre asked.

"I don't need any other ones," Sakuya said.

Flandre wondered about that statement, but she didn't refute it.

So they walked to Flandre's least favorite doors in the mansion, behind the grand hallway. Flandre opened the lid to her abyss, and glanced down, down to the bottom, and then at the long, long twisting spiral staircase.

Flandre turned to the tiny human. "I can carry you down, if you'd like?"

Sakuya glanced at her pocketwatch. "No, that's okay; I'll meet you there."

And then she was gone. Well, once Flandre's eyes refocused, she saw a head of silver hair down at the bottom of the dungeon.

Flandre jumped down.

She fell for a while.
She landed on her feet and her hand. It hurt her knees, just a bit; she'd been too excited to slow her descent, near the end of the fall.

"You're quite fast, when you want to be." Flandre said.

Sakuya smiled and rubbed the back of her head. "From your frame of reference, maybe."

The floor of the basement abyss dungeon whatever was composed of perfectly interlocking smooth dark stones. You couldn't see the walls, through the darkness, but they were made of the same pattern; it worked with all sorts of angles. (It was a little non-euclidean like that.) Every so often a twisted iron candelabra erupted from the ground, but only the central ones were lit. What furniture there was was made of stone, carved as if for a cathedral, save for an ornate black coffin, lined with iron chains. It was a cathedral dungeon, perhaps, to ward against its unholy prisoner.

Flandre led Sakuya to various piles of gothic stuffed animals strewn about, some desicated with their stuffing gathered outside their bodies- these were the treacherous ones, who had begged at Flandre in her sister's voice to teach her how to make Sakuya like her- But some of the animals were newer- they hadn't developed concrete political affiliations yet, which meant one of them could be sent to be liaisons to the Izayoi lands.

Flandre picked up a stuffed animal and turned to Sakuya. "So this is Viceroy Sassypants the second. Her mother was the original viceroy to the first offshore cat colony but her repeated incompetence prompted the ruling monarch to execute her via hideous flame!"

Sakuya clutched her face and smiled. "Oh no!"

"And now a fear of change and a misplaced sense of filial loyalty leads the second Sassypants to fill her late mother's shoes. Metaphorically, I mean; cats don't wear shoes." Flandre held out the partially-dilapidated stuffed cat towards Sakuya. It had a hat and monocle but, alas, no shoes.

Sakuya took the cat and frowned at it. "But- maybe she really likes being the viceroy, and her sense of duty to both herself and her mother's memory leads her to do the best she can as - as the viceroy to the cat colonies?"

Flandre nodded along. "It is quite possible; being both new to the high court and a viceroy to a faraway colony, her motivations are largely a mystery to the rest of the court."

Sakuya hugged the cat to her chest and waddled after Flandre. "So- perhaps we should explore those motivations, then?"

Flandre grinned. "You have like an hour and a half, right?" She took a seat next to a pile of other stuffed animals and she set up the palace and invited all the emissaries.

And so they played with Sargent Flufferbottom and Adviser Snugglebear and Dame Chomp-Chomp of Growl-Growl and the other members of the stuffed high court. Sakuya guided her new friend through the intrigues of royal court, helping Sassypants make a name for herself in the cutthroat, fickle game of smiles and lies and favors and secrets.

And, alas, when Sakuya checked her watch, idly, she lamented that it was time for her to go.

Flandre floated upright and brushed herself off. She helped Sakuya to her feet. "So did you have fun?" Flandre said.

"Yeah!" Sakuya said. She hugged the stuffed cat to her chest, it's head under her chin.
"And now you know not to dispute me when I suggest we go play, next time." Flandre smiled, warmly.

Sakuya nodded. "Yeah! And thanks for the stuffed animal, Grand Exalted Mistress Scarlett!"

Flandre rubbed the stuffed animal's head. "Awww. You call me Flandre, okay?"

"Okay, Flandre!" Sakuya said. Then she left, with a smile on her face.

Flandre jumped backwards into her coffin and stretched her arms out over the edges and fell asleep with an identical smile on her own face.

OMAKE:

Eventually, Sakuya managed to confront the resident librarian, with a curtsey. "Hey, um, Lady Knowledge?" she said, managing not to stutter. "You're real smart, yeah?"

Pathcouli nodded. Koakuma nodded more, from where she stood guard. "I like to think so," said the wizard.

"I had a question, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead."

"Umm." Sakuya poked her fingers together. "What's a 'Viceroy'?"

Patchouli blinked a few times. "A title."

Sakuya nodded. "Okay, but what do they do?"

Patchouli blinked a few more times. "Let me look that up, real quick."
Chapter Summary

And now for something *completely* different.

Chapter Notes

So while I don't stay true to/expound upon canon a lot in this fic, I do try to stay true to the little details, so: Original depictions of Sakuya's pocket-watch described it as a Hunter-case pocket-watch, while all the fan-art of her shows it as an open-face one. However, the only mentions of it in canon are in the titles of her theme music, so maybe it's always open-face because that's works better for the artist? However, the intent in this fic was always to have her have two pocket-watches (I'll try to 'show don't tell' why in the next few chapters), so I'll say one's Hunter-case and the other's the more accepted open-face style.

Also I'll admit to just writing Sakuya as 'cute and young' the last six chapters, when she was viewed through other people's eyes, before I actually tried to get into her head and see what made her interesting. So maybe i've overcompensated here. But, kids can be very smart in some ways while being kind of flaky in others, so that's what i'm going for.

Thirdly, I got a 'D' in the last math class I took, so, take the information in Sakuya and Koakuma's conversation with a grain of salt.

Finally, I renamed this and the last two chapters.

Trying something a little different here. Hope it's not too jarring.

EDIT: Forgot to have Sakuya move her watch back after she'd paused time. Should be internally consistent now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is an intersection of three vectors- two horizontal, and one vertical- that, at least at this point in time, I call my room. Right now, I'm not there, but I know where it is in relation to the main hall, and I know where Mis- where Flandre's room is in relation to the main hall, so it's just a matter of translating that to my frame of reference. It doesn't help that it's night. The mansion is big, and dark, and scary. Maybe it will be less scary, after we've gone through some time together.

The viceroy's soft, though, against my neck and my chin. Flandre had a lot of stuffed animals, so maybe she didn't think much of giving her to me. I'm grateful all the same. Viceroy Sassypants is actually my first dolly ever....

Eventually, I get to the third floor, passed the third guest room on the right side after the stairwell. Watch says 5:55:24. Still some time left.
But- when I open the door, there's blood on the floor. I'm going to have to clean it up- why is there blood on the floor? It's not mine. How did it even get there-

Well, what exactly had happened, it didn't matter. Watch says 5:56:14. Still some time; I won't even have to make any. Time enough to scrub the floors, and furniture, and ceiling- I tuck my dolly into bed and get to work.

When I'm done, watch says 6:27:55. Still have time. Time enough to change and snuggle with the viceroy, for a bit. The sleepiness has gathered behind my eyes, so rubbing the dolly on my face feels nice.

I fall asleep.


Mistress Scarlet looks in. She's smiling. Her teeth are pointy. She says, "Hello, Sakuya, did you sleep well?" It's a routine.

My eyes feel heavy and dirty, on the inside, but I can still smile. "Pretty good, Mistress."

It's a routine.

Mistress Scarlet is nice, and very pretty. She has big, warm wings, and she's only a head and a half taller than me, unlike most of the other maids or staff.

Mistress Scarlet sees the viceroy. "Where did you get that?" Mistress Scarlet points.

"Oh!- Um..."

The dolly's nice to hug. "Flandre's toys aren't very durable." Mistress holds out a hand. "Why don't you let me see that little toy, and I'll have it's joints reinforced, so it won't break."

"Um." I wonder how Sassypants would feel about me giving her away, after only- only a few hours. "Okay." I give her one last squeeze before giving her to Mistress Scarlett.

Mistress tucks the dolly in a pocket in her dress. She smiles. Her teeth are pointy. "Now, are you ready to get ready for the day?"

I think so, so I tell her yes. Watch says 7:00:25.
I report for duty, downstairs, at the maid's quarters. Watch says 7:15:09. Outside the big front door, some maids are scrubbing the face of a Statue of the First Apostate in the hallway. Apparently someone had drawn a mustache on it, but the early shift maids had it covered.

Everyone is really tall. I can see up their nostrils. I get my duties and my supplies and begin.

The first task of the day is to help clean the mansion. I usually don't get assigned the difficult tasks, yet. It's fine. It's actually really relaxing. Once I'm finished, watch says 10:33:21.

The second task of the day involves helping cook. The head cook doesn't know that I'm good with knives, but that's okay. Kneading dough is also quite relaxing. Once I'm finished, watch says 12:04:47.

And my third task changes every day, but it's always some sort of labor, so I get to keep a routine. It also always begins when the clock says 12:30. I make any adjustments to make sure my watch also says 12:30, then. *Keeping time, time, time, in a sort of runic rhyme*...

Today I have to fix a clock, on the fourth floor. Apparently people have noticed me and my watch, and they assumed I knew how to fix it. I think I'm supposed to ask for help, and I kind of want to. I don't want to stand out. But it's a clock, so I also kind of don't want to. I thank the head maid and take the bag of spare parts and get on my way. Watch says 12:35:47.

It's a bit of a walk to the clock. I see some maids on the way, I try to smile at them. When I get there, watch says 12:51:37. Big, standing clocks are actually pretty durable. So it's either a simple problem, or a really complex one. I wonder if this task was just to keep me busy, because they probably don't think I can fix a really complex clock problem.

I check to see if the hands are caught on another, or on anything. They're not.

The pendulum isn't hitting anything either, so that wasn't the problem.

Messing with the levers doesn't fix anything either.

So it's probably a gear problem. I start disassembling the clock. It's kind of relaxing.

At some point (watch says 1:20:24), the oth- Flandre appears. I'm not sure what part of the routine that's supposed to be, but it's nice.

Flandre can float, without needing to alter gravity, which is cool. Her wings appear to be for show, and they have pretty shiny things on them, in bright colors. She's pretending to lie on her stomach, in mid-air, her head besides me. Her breath is less bad than you might think.

"Hey hey, Sakuya Sakuya," says Flandre. She smiles. Her teeth are pointy. "C'mon, lets go an play!" She waves at the clock, "that's probably not that important."

There's a sing-song quality to her first line, it's really nice. Sort of like, uh:
Hey~, hey~, Sa-ku-ya Sa-ku-ya
Cmon, let's go and play,
I'm bored, so I just, wanted to talk to ya'
through time, we'll just whittle away....

I can work on it. Anyway, Flandre's waiting for a response. I don't know how important it is that I fix this clock, and the mansion's really big, with lots of other clocks, but I don't want to disobey orders. Watch says 1:21:52.

"Let me just finish this." I mean, I do kind of want to play....

"Aww," Flandre frowns. One of her teeth pokes out. It's pretty cool. "How long's it gonna take you?"

"Can- can you turn around?"

Flandre does. She spins on one foot, with her arms propelled out.


All the red in the world turns to grey (Flandre's wings look really cool blueshifted, though), and it gets colder, and I'm lighter. It's okay, I don't mind the cold too much, and if you fidget, you bump into the heavy air and since you're going so fast, you heat up, so it can balance out.

I replace what I think is the offending gear, and it turns out I was right. It's a little hard to bring the whole clock with me, but I manage. I'm only a little tired after I finish setting and winding it, and making sure it's level.

And I'm done. Watch says 2:12:59. 50 minutes, 46 seconds. I'm kind of pushing what I'm supposed to...

It's fine. It's fine.

I hit resume on the world. Watch says 2:13:00.

Flandre finishes her spin. I pull out my other watch, and stick it on the floor. It says 2:13:09. Watch says 2:13:09. Keeping time, time, time, in a sort of runic rhyme....

I take my time, this time. To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells....

After a minute, the floor watch says 2:14:07. Watch says 2:14:09. I make adjustments. Then I move them back 50 minutes and 46 seconds. The next time I see a clock, I'll double check.

Then I tell Flandre I'm done.

Flandre looks up the fixed clock. "Huh. So you have some magic power that fixes clocks, but it's embarrassing to do so you don't want me watching?"

"I- sort of." I should have just said yes.

"Is it related to your teleportation thing?"

"Umm. Yes."
Flandre taps her chin. "Can you stop time?"

"Um! I mean, not quite, but maybe from my frame of reference...."

"That's so cool!" Flandre smiles.

"Is- is it?"

"Yeah, you're so cool, Sakuya!"

I'm not sure what those words mean in that order.

"Anyway," Flandre starts walking down the hall. She gestures for me to follow. "You can bring Sassypants and we can resume our epic tale of court intrigue."

"Oh!- umm...." I tell her about Mistress, and why I don't have the dolly anymore. Watch says 1:16:03.

"Oh," Flandre says. She gets one of those adult looks on her face. But then she smiles. "It's fine, we'll go and rescue her later." she shakes her head. "But we gonna go and play now, since you stopped time to finish your chores just for me. I gotta make it worth it for ya."

Flandres rubs my head. It's nice!

"Anyway," says Flandre, "You know who might be able to help you get better at your time shenanigans?"

"I- I don't think I need to stand out...." Watch says 1:17:42.

"Nonsense. If you want to get good enough to stop time, then we'll make it happen.

"I- okay." I manage a smile.

"Anyway, I think I know who can help."

We do have a library, so I think of Lady Knowledge. I ask, and Flandre says yes.

"Yep, Patchi knows everything," Flandre says. She turns to me and pretends to whisper. "It's cause she spends all day reading."

"That's- that's cool. I dont know how to read, though...."

Flandre swats the air. "Thats fine, you don't need to be part of the system, girl. Besides, you can just make people read for you, if you're strong enough."

I don't want that. I tell her that I don't want to be a burden.

Flandre's smile fades just a bit- I didn't mean for that to happen- "Well," says the other Mistress, "The desire to be independent is admirable, so I'm sure I can help you learn to read, someday."

She pats my shoulder. Maybe it's okay.
Eventually, Flandre leads me to the library. Watch says 1:34:22.

The construct known as Koakuma was there- the one that danced with Lady Knowledge yesterday. Flandre says hi, and they simulate a conversation for a while.

"Hello," emits the construct known as Koakuma. She bows. She has wings too; they're pretty. "After we met, I did a little background research on you."

That can't be good. Watch says 1:39:54. "Oh. Um."

"Kuki, so rude," Flandre rubs my head. It's nice. "But what'd you find out?"

The construct looks to me. "That your very existence warps the fabric of space-time."

There's a familiar feeling. A bad feeling. I look at the ground. "Um." Watch says 1:40:12.

The construct waves the air. "I don't mean that in a bad way. it's actually very interesting."

That's... huh. Maybe she's not so bad.

The construct closes her eyes and touches her torso. "Actually, the very reason Mistress Knowledge lives here is because the mansion disguises the use of forbidden and/or dangerous magics. Things that might attract the attention of, let's say, less than savory monstrosities."

Flandre chuckles. I chuckle a little too, even though i dont knowI what's funny.

Flandre waves her hands. "Anyway, we're here because Sakuya wants to get good enough to stop time."

"You can't stop time," Koakuma says.

"Not- not like, for everyone. Just from my frame of reference."

"No, I mean," said Koakuma. "You can't do that either."

That annoys me, a little, since Flandre had said I should try. I try to let go of those feelings. "Not yet. I just- I just need to get better." But, maybe it's better if I don't....

"No, I mean, it's literally impossible to stop time." The construct known as Koakuma waves her hands, "See, the concept of 'stopping time' is, like, flattening an object to be two-dimensional. No matter how much you squish something, it'll still have atoms, and they'll still be at least the planck distance high. Taking away the third dimension of something is impossible, without fundamentally restructuring the universe."

Flandre nods. I frown, and I make sure the construct known as Koakuma knows I'm frowning.

The construct sighs. "To complete the analogy, though, if you flattened something to one atom high, it would still look two dimensional, but it actually isn't. So I can see how you might be confused."

"But time isn't a dimension," I tell her, "It's a property of things. Like, a given object has a time-rate, which determines how it feels time, but it's not like it's like a Cartesian dimension."
"Sure it is is; if you add a complex 'time' dimension to 3-space it's still invariant under inertial reference frame transformations in 3-space, and you can model time as the fourth axis."

Ugh. See, this was the problem with math people. They could make all their internally consistent models but that didn't mean the models were right.

"No, see," I say. "Everyone thinks time is a dimension because we already use time coordinates all the time, like," I gesture to my watch. (It says 2:25:31.) "We always say things like, 'lets do this in one hour' or 'it happened four days ago at 3:00 PM', but those are just, um, turns of phrase. If time were a dimension, then, like, things that moved slower in time would eventually exist in the past..."

Koakuma has a chalk board nearby, helpfully. I draw a line on it.

"So if time were a dimension, and things had 'time speed', and you had one thing going forward in time at one rate, then after a set period of time, it'd go forward a discrete amount."

I draw a shorter line below it. "But if you had something else with a slower 'time speed', then after the same amount of time, it'd end up having traveled less 'time distance', and that's not what happens. The tortoise is there when the rabbit's won the race, it just had to wait longer."

I remember to label my axis. The horizontal one's time.

Flandre looks confused.

"You can think of it like, the top one is a rabbit, and the bottom one a tortoise. If this were in space," I rub out the word 'time' at the bottom and then write space, "After the rabbit finishes the race, the tortoise is still behind. They're discretely at different points in space." I re-label the axis as 'time'. "So if time was a dimension like space, then eventually, things with a slower time-rate would end up existing in the past, behind you."

I look to see if Koakuma understands. "But it doesn't work that way, things with more time-rate still exist; they just went faster."

"But that happens," the construct says. She draws vertical lines on the diagram. "If you're the tortoise, then you see the rabbit ahead of you, whether or not the rabbits moving faster through space, in which it finishes the race faster, or in time, in which it's experienced the whole race from the rabbit's point of view."

"But that's just from the tortoise's perspective. It doesn't work that way in time; the rabbit just looks like it moved more."

"Yes; see, information can't travel back in time, but if you gave both the tortoise and the rabbit a watch, the tortoise's would read the same time as the rabbit's at some point in the past."

"That's true, but that's not because one's moved through time more," Watch says 2:34:52. I run my finger along its ridge, this time. "It's just, time's still going, but the rabbit's just felt more time in the same amount of time, because its time-rate is higher."

"So why don't you just say the rabbit's moved forward more through time?"

"Because if you're the rabbit, then your frame of reference is just yours, and from the real frame of reference, you just moved faster."

"Who says your inertial frame of reference isn't the real one?"
I blink a little. I- of course it isn't. I say so.

Koakuma waves her hands. "Mathematically, there's no reason that when you speed up, you can't say the world is stopped. Your frame of reference is just as valid."

"Yeah, but," I look away. Watch says 2:36:33. "That's just math. I'm not stopping the world. I'm not. I'm just moving faster through it."

Koakuma seems less intent on the argument. She tries to smile at me. "So you're just saying, your power isn't altering time, it's just adjusting your, ah, 'time-rate'."

"Yeah."

"So why don't you just say you have super speed?"

"Because I'm also warping space by altering its time-rate."

Koakuma suddenly stops trying to be conciliatory. She stands up and makes a face. "What- you just said you didn't think time is a dimension!"

"It's not!"

Koakuma opens her mouth. "But the only way time can warp space is if you model it as a 4-dimensional Lorentzian coordinate-system within a pseudo-Riemannian manifold!"

"No, time inflects space, but that doesn't mean it's an equivalent dimension."

"That makes no mathematical sense."

I walk over to the chalkboard. "I'll show you how it makes math sense-"

"Don't you disrespect me, little girl!" Koakuma steps forward and folds her arms. "Your species merely adopted the math. Mine was born in it." She picks up a piece of chalk. "Walk me through your equations and I'll show you how time is a dimension-"

Flandre bursts out laughing at this point. It doesn't stop our subsequent big, long argument about the nature of space-time.

Eventually, Flandre puts an arm around my shoulder. I wasn't ready for it, so I, uh, kind of smacked her in the nose-"

"I'm so sorry!" I say.

Flandre doesn't even seem to notice. "You're so smart, Sakuya!" she rubs my head. It's- it's nice. "Beating Kuki at her own game like that, ha!"

Koakuma looks upset, but in like a friendly way. I chuckle.

"Anyway," Koakuma says, "My original point was- before we got distracted-" She getures to the chalkboard. I chuckle again. Flandre snorts. "Is that, even if you don't think 'time' is an equivalent dimension to space, you still have the universal speed limit to consider. Actually, if you think of your power as a variation of super-speed, this makes the analogy easier; you can asymptotically approach light speed, making the rest of the world seem slower from your frame of reference, but the faster you go, you get more diminishing returns, and even at infinite energy you won't break light speed."
Well, that's a little disheartening. "Maybe it's just that nobody's put enough power in yet to break light speed."

"Maybe. I'll admit I'm not an expert on relativistic physics. I'll keep any eye out for anyone who might, though...." Koakuma looks into the distance and thinks.

Flandre turns to me. "So if you can speed yourself up, can you slow yourself down-"

"NO!"


"I mean, I- I can't," I lie. Watch says 5:52:42.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Koakuma says. "I'm sorry." She doesn't make eye contact, but that's okay. Watch says 5:52:46.


Watch says 5:52:49.

Koakuma breaths. "You're power's still useful though-"

"It's cool!" Flandre says. She's so nice.

Koakuma manages to smile. "Yeah, it's cool. You're cool."

I guess I don't need to not smile. Watch says 5:52:57.

"Yeah," Koakuma says, "And you shouldn't worry about not being able to stop time. It's impossible, anyway."

I look up. "Oh, no, I can stop time, just not with my powers," They both look at me. They're confused. "It's actually pretty easy. Everyone can do it."

"Really?" Koakuma asks.

"Yeah. It's, um. It's called a 'camera'."

Flandre breaks out laughing. Koakuma frowns and sighs.
So if I messed up and the writing wasn't clear, the idea was: Sakuya checks her watch like, all the time, she says she's only slowing time down from her reference point because of self-esteem issues, and she likes poetry, but since she can't read she only remembers snippets she's heard second-hand.
I guarantee no expertise in aristocracy, the physical manifestations of friendship, or math.

Flandre had a new best friend, it seemed.

Well, she didn't remember having someone she really considered a best friend before, but, hey, maybe this was what it was like? She and Sakuya hung around a lot, and Sakuya laughed at most of her jokes (never the puns, though, but that was fair), and Flandre enjoyed talking to the mansion's newest maid.

Now, this tiny baby human had somehow managed to be her closest confidant (not that Flandre did actually end up telling Sakuya a lot- she was still too young for all of Flandre's Real Adult problems- but like, they still talked about feelings sometimes. And hey, some of Flandre's frustrations with her sister seemed to seem less important when, say, Sakuya was telling her about clocks or when they were pranking Koakuma or when Flandre was imparting her ancient wisdom to the human.

And it was fun- Flandre never considered herself a mentor befor. A role model, obviously, but never like a direct mentor- Patchi had taken to adopting Flandre's flippant demeanor during the times she wanted to avoid trouble but only if she was able to muster up the energy to, and Koakuma had emulated some of Flandre's motions when the demon tried to act more mortal, and Meiling had started using some of the slang Flandre liked to bandy about and some of Flandre's serial killings had copy-cats over the years, but Flandre had never, like, consciously shown someone how to cute their way out of getting in trouble, dance the waltz, or hunt reckless humans in the streets.

Sakuya changed that. Sakuya looked up to her, and that felt pretty darn great. Maybe it was that Flandre was so used to never having a receptive audience or she was so used to everyone talking down to her, but Flandre swore she'd live up to that. Even if she only had a nebulous idea of what 'that' was.

(Aaaannnnd, you know- not that Flandre cared at all what her sister thought, or that she gave any credence to Remilia's outdated, artificial, and, honestly, destructive ideas of the aristocracy, but like, you know, some of the outward manifestations of nobility were pretty innocuous when not paired with the elitism and avarice inherent with the broader ideology, and, like, no philosophy is 100% bad, so the fact that Flandre seemed to evoke some of them when interacting with Sakuya wasn't, like, a concious decision to act aristocratic. It's not like Flandre was deliberately trying to act in a way to make her seem more noble or, badness forbid, impress her sister, but, like, Remilia had mentioned more than once that, since she had decided to take the young maid under her wing, (pun intended) Flandre seemed less narcissistic and more becoming of someone of their bloodline. And that was, like, whatever. Flandre didn't care.)

Plus, Sakuya had, like, timey-wimey powers. Powerful abilities. Great pranking potential. So like, that was cool.
So like, maybe that was why being around Sakuya made Flandre less angry and hopeless and stuff.

Flandre didn't really have a prior experience to compare it to, but this was probably what it was like to have a best friend.

This afternoon, after Flandre was pretty sure Sakuya was finishing up her maid duties (One downside to being friends with Sakuya was that she had a job, and thus was not available for hanging out 100% of the time.), Flandre floated down next to her favorite human.

"Hey, hey, Sakuya Sakuya," Flandre said.

Sakuya paused dusting the Corinthian columns and turned to Flandre and smiled. "H-hey, Flandre!" she said. She smiled, big and bright as only children can.

"I thought I might inquire if you'd care to join me on a little jaunt through our garden? I would be delighted to have company twereforth. We'll eat some of the fresh strawberries; they're sure to be piquant as shit this season."

"Oh! Yeah, that sounds fun," Sakuya said.

Flandre turned around, letting her arms fly out due to the momentum. She paused just a second, and turned back around. Sakuya had a few requests about people watching her use her powers. Like, if she ran off to get something and came back, it'd just look like a blur, with Sakuya showing up in a slightly different spot when she resumed time, but if she stopped time and sat around like a clock or something for an extended period of time from her reference frame, apparently it looked weird, and Sakuya didn't like people seeing that. Flandre did wonder what that looked like, but not enough to press the issue. Maybe this was part of being friends- accepting the ways in which your friends inconvenienced you? Only it wasn't really inconveniencing her, just getting in the way of her curiosity, and that really shouldn't take priority over Sakuya's comfort, right? Flandre stifled those emotions.

Afterwards, in the garden, after they had breathed in the afternoon air and stained their teeth pink with the juice of fresh strawberries, Flandre invited her new best friend (seemingly) to sit on one of the intricately sculpted black cast iron park benches.

"So, Sakuya," Flandre said. "Can I say something?"

"Um. Ok." Sakuya said. "Am I in trouble?"

"Oh, no- to the contrary." Flandre rubbed the back of her head. "So, like, I'm not really good with.
You know. Describing things."

Flandre made an awkward smile to the garden plants. "And I never really had a friend before so, like, I don't have the benifit of experience either, but. Um."

Flandre reached into her pocket to pull out the friendship bracelet she had woven last night. She held it out to Sakuya but wasn't able to make eye contact, so the vampire turned her head to the side and idly admired the chrysanthemum bushes. "Here," Flandre said. "I made this for you."

In the corner of her eye, she saw Sakuya brighten as she took the bracelet.

"Wow, thanks! Um, I didn't get anything for you, though...."

"Naw, that wasn't necessary," Flandre said. "The bracelet was, like, a physical manefestation of, like, my grattitude. Thanks for being my friend."

Sakuya clutched the bracelet to her heart. "I will cherish it forever."

Flandre coughed, in embarrassment. "You don't- you don't have to do that. Like, I didn't want to make it unwearable, but like, if you ever want to, like, destroy it or anything, thats cool. Its yours."

The enormity of what Flandre just did caught up to her. "Actually, if you want to go ahead and ritualistically burn that to destroy the evidence-" Flandre pontificated, "That way, the friendship ritual will be complete! Wooo~"

Sakuya giggled. "Okay, I'll do that. Mistress Remilia said you have trouble expressing vulnerability, but i know what you mean."

And that was just a little annoying. Like, not quite to 'ruining the moment' levels, but thinking of her sister always put Flandre in a little bit of a bad mood. Outwardly, Flandre didn't react. "Did she?"

"Yeah, but I think that's normal." Sakuya shot a brief forlorn glance at the cobblestones before her shoes. "I- I don't like talking about feelings either. But. Um." Sakuya glanced up, and then back down. "Well, since you shared, I could. Um. Tell you a story or something..."

Flandre leaned closer, expectantly.

"So, back in the village I was from, my grandmother was the clockmaker."

Flandre nodded. That made sense, to explain why Sakuya knew so much about clocks, (and why she had some fancy watches on her), though Flandre would have believed it if having time powers automatically, intrinsically conferred a knowledge of cogs and springs and things.

"And one day, she started working on a big clock, and, I wanted to see how it'd turn out, but I got impatient. And. Um."

Sakuya's voice cracked. And she blurred, but before she did, Flandre was pretty sure she saw some tears in the young human's eyes.

But Sakuya had recovered, and she looked up and smiled. "Actually. Um. I don't- do you think I could maybe finish this story later."

Flandre made a smile. "Of course."

And speaking of 'ruining the moment' feelings, nobody could do that better than Flandre herself.
Because she actually felt a little hurt that Sakuya didn't trust her enough to finish telling Flandre her tragic backstory, and Flandre hated that she felt that way. Because obviously Sakuya didn't owe anybody her life story, and Flandre wasn't the kind of person to make someone act a certain way just for her benefit. That's what Remilia did.

But the thing was, maybe Flandre was, actually, that sort of person. Because she did feel betrayed and hurt. So maybe she was just a little self-absorbed psychopath.

Maybe this was why she never had friends. Maybe she just didn't have the right mindset for it-

Flandre shook her head. You know, she was still new at this, so maybe she'd just take it one step at a time.

"Aaannnyyyway," Flandre said. She took a few steps towards the mansion. "You wanna go inside and prank Kuki or something?"

Sakuya brightened up. "Yeah! Stupid Koakuma," Sakuya did something with her hands. "Can you believe she thinks that numbers are a representation of an abstract metaphysical ideal, rather than a convention for the purpose of quantifying groups of objects?"

Flandre suppressed a giggle. "I literally cannot believe that."
Flandre's New Best Friend, Green Side

Chapter Summary

Three times Koishi makes Sakuya cry.

Chapter Notes

Don't try this at home. Even if you don't have magical powers. Koishi's being kind of a jerk, but I tagged this fic as 'romantic black comedy' and I'm committed to at least trying to live up to that. Jury's still out on if the violence is darkly funny or just stupid.

Flandre had a new best friend, it seemed.

Because Flandre couldn't remember any of the times she spent with her.

And Koishi alternated between being despondent and being outraged at the fact.

Because on one hand, of course Flandre would eventually find someone she connected with who, you know, actually remembered her. And that made sense; see, like, Koishi had other friends- Okuu and Rin and, okay, maybe just those two, but that was enough for when Koishi needed to, like, talk about her feelings and junk, or if she needed a minion or a favor or something- and Flandre kind of didn't- though the vampire seemed to get along with her gardener and the wizard who lived in her library, so maybe Flandre had a social outlet too?- The point was, it made sense for Flandre to seek out some sort of friend-type person. Consciously, Koishi could accept that.

But on the other hand, how dare this stupid baby human start becoming Flandre's closest confidant? How dare she have the audacity to think that she could make Flandre happy?

And of course Koishi wanted Flandre to be happy. Who wouldn't? Except it sort of felt... bad, to see her being happy with someone else.

Because, on this other hand, Koishi couldn't help but feel a little hurt, and sometimes she didn't want Flandre to be happy, if it wasn't with her.

And that was terrible. What kind of best-friend/lover/person-you-really-connected-with-for-the-first-time didn't want her best-friend/lover/person-you-really-connected-with-for-the-first-time to be happy? Was Koishi just a terrible sentient being? Was that why she didn't deserve love?

Koishi hadn't really been in the position to get jealous of anyone for a long time. Part of being immortal, and also cool and powerful and having the ultimate getaway, meant that she could, just, go around murdering people who even mildly inconvenienced you, so if you did end up getting jealous or uncomfortable or something, you wouldn't be for long.

And after a while, you murdered all the idiots in your life, and were left with only people you actually liked, and you never had to feel jealous anymore.
Only this time, that wasn't an option. And not just because Sakuya was deceptively hard to kill.

But that didn't mean Koishi had to completely walk back her previous modus operandi....

So one day, Koishi resumed her new recent hobby; stalking the Scarlet Devil Mansion and scaring the maids, like some kind of horrible monster. Well, she was some kind of horrible monster, so it worked out. And it gave her opportunity to train some of her more subtle skills.

Like, one time, she played up one group of maid's subconscious inklings that everyone else in their group was silently judging them, and they had a big fight and huffed off in their separate ways and one of them got lost in the non-euclidean labyrinth of the deep Mansion. Good times.

Eventually, Koishi's hunting pattern brought her along the path of one particular maid.

Koishi smiled her best scary smile, wide and toothy, with her eyes narrowed in both contempt and amusement. "Hey, hey," she said, and then, pointedly, definitively, "Sakuya."

Sakuya gasped and clutched her baby hands to her chest. "U-um. H-how do you know my name?"

Koishi stepped forward. Sakuya took a step back.

"Don't you know?" Koishi said. "I'm the boogie-monster. A-boogie-woogie-wooo~~" She waved her arms around.

The maid put her hand to her mouth. Koishi heard a giggle.

Koishi smiled. "Oh, you like that?"

The human froze. "Ummm...."

Koishi then waved her arms around and spun around in a midair pirouette. "Woooo~ WOOOOOO~"

Sakuya giggled some more. She let her guard down.

Until Koishi got close enough to put an arm around the tiny human, and Sakuya's smile wavered.

And then Koishi grabbed Sakuya's arm and put on her scary face- she widened her eyes and grinned from ear to ear and twitched parts of her face, periodically.

And Sakuya screamed, except Koishi made 'shhhh' noises and put a finger to the human's lips until Sakuya's screams stifled into blubering sobs.

Koishi laughed, legitimately. This was hilarious.

Koishi brought Sakuya's hand in front of her teeth. She pantomimed eating some of the human's fingers. Sakuya cried.
And eventually, the joke wore itself thin, and Koishi let Sakuya go. Sakya immediately disappeared via time bullshit, and slit Koishi's throat on her way out for good measure, but that didn't stop Koishi from cackling. Or gurgling, until her throat regenerated.

The next day, though, there was a slight change in procedure. Unintentionally, of course. Koishi showed up to continue her new recent hobby, stalking around like some horrible monster, doing the functionary scarings of some temporary maids. And once she got that out of the way, she followed her regular hunting pattern until she found her favorite prey and did her regular routine.

"Ahhh!" Sakuya screamed, after Koishi blew her bluff. Koishi let her run, this time, because Koishi kind of needed the exercise. Sakuya was predictable, at least with the benefit of trail and error and prey that doesn't remember your previous attempts, so Koishi had planned to preempt Sakuya's preferred hiding spot-

Except before she managed that, a sharp pain blossomed out of the lower half of her back and she was flown to the wall.

Koishi blinked and patted the ground around her, until she found her hat and pulled it back on her head.

The Lady of the House- Remilia Scarlet- walked towards her, purposefully, menacingly. Her spear was in her hands and her eyes were glowing red and her wings were extended, obscuring Sakuya from view.

And she didn't look amused. Not even angry, not really. Just cold, dispassionately furious. "Get away from her," Remilia intoned.

Koishi smirked. Nothing to worry about; Flandre's elder sister didn't hold a candle to the real monster of the Scarlet De-

"Ooof!" Koishi emitted, after her feint was preempted and she took another blow to the torso.

Koishi shot a blind barrage of green plasma bolts with her left hand and circled around to her right. She parried the next few blows from the vampire lord and landed a scratch during the next melee, though afterwards Remilia used the reach of her weapon to keep Koishi out of range for another rake.

And shifting to ranged missiles wasn't effective either, since the vampire seemed to have enchanted her wings to be able to just swat away anything Koishi literally threw at her.

And one point Koishi had the opportunity to get the upper hand- Remilia had left Sakuya unprotected, and Koishi could send a bolt at the defenseless bystander, and Remilia would have to divert her focus to protecting the human, and in doing so she'd leave herself open for Koishi. Basic villain tactics, really.
Except that if it worked, it might actually hurt Flandre's new best friend. Like, permanently. She was just a human, after all.

So Koishi sighed and braced for Remilia's killing blow and decided that, hey, it wasn't everyday that you got blown through two walls and a support pillar, so she should enjoy the rare experience.

So Koishi laughed through the impact, and the second impact, and the third impact that split the support pillar in two, and she had enough time to dodge the collapse of the ceiling but, eh.

Koishi blazed her way out of the rubble. She panted and laughed, at the same time. "Well, I guess I've lost my edge," she said. She removed her hat with her non-broken arm and bowed, twirling the accessory theatrically in front of her by the brim with the fingers of her right hand. And when Remilia charged with her spear, it only impaled the headpiece; Koishi had vanished.

And Remilia looked around, before deciding that her assailant must have left. She ran up to the maid. She kneeled down and helped Sakuya to her feet.

"Are you okay?" Remilia said.

"Y-yeah-"

Remilia let out the breath she was holding. "I thank you for your help, Ms. Izayoi, but you should have left that fight to me. That thing was dangerous-"

And that gave Koishi the opening to sneak up and dilute their memories.

While the pair were blinking through their malaise, Koishi stepped around them, skipping slightly as she did, tapping each on their temples and the backs of their heads.

And Koishi pulled her hat off Remilia's spear and pressed it onto her head. Hats didn't heal, so this fight probably counted as a loss.

Cleanup for that little debacle took a looonggg time, but she was pretty confident she ensured Remilia remembered it as overreacting to a mouse that scared her newest maid or something.

Koishi made a smile. Like, those kinds of smiles where you're trying to smile to fool everyone into thinking you're happy- primarily yourself- but you don't quite buy it, so you're showing your teeth and the gums in the lower left corner of your mouth and the corners of your eyes are widening in
fear or awkwardness or a little bit of both.

And she followed her regular hunting pattern until she found her favorite prey.

"Hey, hey," she said. She tipped her hat. "Young lady."

"Oh! Um." Sakuya said. "H-hello? W-who are you?"

"I'm the boogie monster," Koishi said, with a lot less of her previous conviction in her voice and her arm wavings, this time.

"I-I'm Sakuya," said the maid.

Koishi tipped her hat. "Charmed, truly."

"So. um. If you're the boogie-monster, do you, like, do the boogie all the time?" Sakuya said.

Koishi breathed, once, despondently. "Did you steal that joke from Flandre?"

"I- yes." Sakuya looked down. "I can't come up with my own jokes yet...."

Koishi shrugged. "Eh. Some people never learn the knack. And those that do start by stealing other people's jokes." Koishi resumed eye contact. "But that means you told Flandre about me. Does that mean you're remembering me?"

"Ummmm," Sakuya's face betrayed her nervousness. "Maybe? Was- was I supposed to?"

Sakuya was a child, and they had more resilient subconsciousnesses. Koishi suspected what happened was that children's imaginations papered over the holes in their memories, allowing Koishi's memory to persist for more than the usual amount of time. But she wasn't a psionologist, so she couldn't say for sure.

Koishi shrugged. "Unless there's another boogie monster bopping around?"

"Ummm." Sakuya clutched her head. "I- I can't remember a different boogie-monster-"

"Then you do remember me?"

"I- um- I- I haven't been trained as a parlor maid yet..."

"But do you remember greeting me?"

"I- I- no, but, um. " Sakuya breathed and blinked and stood up straight. "Hello, welcome to the Scarlet Devil Mansion. I am not able to assist you, but one of the other staff members will be around to assist you shortly."

"Why can't you help me?"

And that broke the little human, it seemed.

Sakuya's eyes wobbled and she sputtered even more so when she spoke. "I-I'm still not very good at my job, yet, and- and - and- ~bwaaaaa~"

Sakuya started crying. She brought her fists to her eyes and tears ran across her fingers, down her cheeks and her arms.
Koishi flinched. "Oh, dang-" Koishi held her hands out and took a step forward, then pulled her hands away, and grimaced at the crying child.

Koishi patted Sakuya's head. "There there," she said, unconvincing even to herself, "I've seen you work, and you're pretty dedicated.

Sakuya paused crying. Or at least, she stopped bawling. "Y-you have?"

"Yeah. I stalk around the halls, here, sometimes, scaring people," Koishi said. "I mean, 'doing the boogie'."

Sakuya covered a giggle with her fingertips. "Hee hee."

Koishi made a smile. "So, why don't tell me about yourself?"

"Ummm...."

"What makes you interesting? Why does Flandre like hanging out with you?"

"I. Um. I don't know," Sakuya said.

"You don't know?" Koishi lilted, "Look at you, pretending to be humble. Surely you're more self-aware than that."

Sakuya's eyes widened. "Um-!"

"You've never thought about what makes people like you?"

"I-," Sakuya said, "I don't really like thinking about myself too much," Sakuya said.

"Still pretending to be humble, huh?"

"No-!" Sakuya whined, "I- I mean- It's scary to think about yourself. And who you are...."

Koishi exhaled. "Can't argue with that." She shifted where she sat. "Okay, then, tell me about Flandre."

"I- um." Sakuya said, "What's- what did you want to know?"

"I dunno. What can you tell me?"

"She's... nice, and cool, and super strong!"

"She's 'nice'?"

"Yeah! She gave me a dolly, and we play games and stuff. Shes really cool!" Sakuya tilted her head. "Um. Why did you want to know?"

Well, it's not like Koishi'd need to lie in order to keep the maid from remembering a little moment of vulnerability. And apparently, something about Sakuya was really good at provoking honest.

"She's forgotten me," Koishi confessed. "Flandre has, I mean. We used to be close. Like, really."

"That's-that's too bad," Flandre said, "But you could just reconnect with her."

Koishi sighed. "I guess I could."
"Yeah!" Sakuya smiled. "If you were really good friends before, why don't you just become friends again?

Koishi sighed. 'Good friends'. Technically that wasn't wrong. "Yeah, I guess I could go through all that again." Koishi sighed and levitated up and stretched out her back, as if she were lying on air. "But it's tiring. Over and over. And she gets to meet me over and over and over while I remember every time before that."

"Oh! Um."

"And I think I get worse at it every time, honestly," Koishi said. "The first time it was so natural. So wonderful. So perfect that not even a staged and scripted repeat can recapture those feelings. And every time I try again it feels more and more forced."

Koishi looked at the ceiling through her fingertips. "And sometimes I think I don't deserve it. Maybe I don't really want to be friends, if I can't even muster up the nerve to reintroduce myself again."

"I- I also worry that I don't deserve friends," Sakuya said. She sighed.

Koishi didn't have a response to that.

"But um. Do- do you want me to introduce you?" Sakuya said, brightening slightly.

Koishi blinked.

"I guess that might work," Koishi said.

Sakuya smiled. "Cool!" Sakuya said. She smiled. Then she looked at her hands. "A-and, you said you scare people, right?"

"I guess?"

Sakuya wobbled on her feet and looked at the ground. "'Cause, I kind of have someone I'd like you to scare...."
Flandre's New Best Friend, Blue Side

Chapter Notes

I guarantee no expertise on math, time, stuffed animals, tea, Gensoukyou lore, or being a nervous child in over her head in social situations. Well, maybe that last one, just a little.

Keeping time time time, in a sort of runic rhyme....

As objects move forward in the time dimension, they experience the potential for change.

To stop in time is to stagnate. To be a lake instead of a river. And lakes are full of like algae and gross things, while rivers are splashy and fun and filled with fish, and bears come to eat the fish.

But without the ability to experience time, you can't experience change, and you can't splash around with bears.

So, I guess it's cool to make a new friend, even if that friend is the boogie monster, since that means I'm not stagnating....


And she's an old friend of Mis- of Flandre, who's also my friend, and super cool, so it would make sense that the boogie monster would be cool too, and might be likely to be my friend.

And- she does seem cool, if a little sad. I don't know all that much about grown-ups but there's a lot of reasons they have to be sad. Maybe she and Flandre had a falling out? That sounds bad. But maybe I can help...

Watch says 2:45:02. I bump into Flandre as she's on the way to finding me. She likes to 'surprise me', at around 3:00:00 PM every day- give or take about 0:30:00- to ask if I want to hang around and stuff. It's pretty nice, even if sometimes I can't because I promised Mistress Remilia I would, like, learn something from Lady Knowledge or Ms. Hong.

And Flandre likes to sings songs. It's sort of like:

'Hey Hey, Sakuya Sakuya, C'mon, let's go and play~'

'You're busy, but, I'm happy to walk-with-ya until you are done for the day~

"Hey Hey, Sakuya, Sakuya," Flandre says, "Who's your new friend?"

Hmm. That second part was in a different, uh, cadence or something. Like, four words, each one tick long, in a group, rather than three words for one tick each, or like the 'hey' that lasted for three tick. But maybe it could be something like; 'hey, Sakuya, who's your new friend? I'll meet her too, and shake her hand~.

Hmmm. That last part doesn't rhyme. Friend- send- end- rend- pretend- offend-
"Oh!" I remember I'm supposed to be introducing someone. I point to the green-haired lady in the nice hat with the third eye with a position vector defined by non-deterministic dynamical parameters. "This is. Um. The boogie monster?"

Flandre smiled and looks, uh, pranky. Like, her eyebrows are raised and she smiles, like she does when she wants to prank someone. "So does that mean you do the boogie all the time?" She asks.

The boogie-monster laughs at that, even though she didn't when I said the same thing. Maybe I didn't say the joke right?

The boogie monster leans into what I guess is a boogie pose. "Maybe." she waves her arms in what I guess is a boogie dance move. "Why, do you boogie?"

"Perhaps. I challenge you to a dance off!"

And they do the boogie at each other. At first, it's weird. Really weird. It made me all kind of nervous to watch. Like, when your friend does something so embarrassing you can't help but feel embarrassed too.

Watch says 2:57: 49.

And when watch says 3:01:24, they get tired of dancing, and they start laughing at each other. So maybe they're friends again? But Flandre never said anything that made it seem like she used to know her but then they had a falling out.

"So you like to dance?" says the boogie monster.

Flandre shrugged. "I guess it's fun. I haven't had any formal training or anything. My big sis is really big on Ballet. Like, it's a sign of nobility for an aristocrat to have the time and resources to spend developing skill in a style with an arbitrary set of dance moves. So I make it a point to learn the movements of the proletariat."

I don't know what most of those words mean, but Flandre likes talking about stuff like that.

"Ah, sisters," The boogie monster says, "I could tell you a few stories about my own....."

And she does. It's kind of weird, since its adult stuff I don't think I'm supposed to be hearing, and she's mostly just talking to Flandre.

Flandre seems interested, though, so I decide to duck out and take my leave. A good maid is invisible to their guests, after all.

"Sakuya, wait!" Flandre flies over to me. She's pouting, and one of her fangs is poking out. "I'm sorry; we haven't been making the effort to include you."

"That's- that's okay. We'll have time later."

Flandre glances over at the boogie monster. "If you're sure...."

Well, it looks like Flandre does want to hang out with the boogie monster, so maybe they did know each other before? And if so, I probably should let them do that, since I see Flandre every day and the boogie monster's probably just visiting for a while before she has to go back to... boogieland...
or something.

"I'm sure."

"Alrighty, then. See ya later, Sakuya." Flandre smiles and makes a sound effect when she smiles.

So, I guess I have the afternoon free.

It's actually weird, since I haven't had a lot of time to do things just on my own since I got here. Mostly just working or laying in bed.

Watch says 3:30:54. I'm at Mistress Remilia's door. Maybe one day it'll stop be intimidating- and not just since the door won't be so relatively big once I'm bigger.

Mistress Remilia is there. She's always so imperious and cool, but like in a different way. See, there's different ways to be cool, and Mistress Remilia is cool in a different way than Flandre or the boogie monster or other cool youkai.

She smiles at me. Her teeth are pointy.

"Sakuya, how fortuitous to meet you," she says.

"Oh! Um. Is it?"

"Yes, because I have something for you-" Mistress Remilia goes back into her room, and she come back out with a dolly- this one's a doggy with one of those one-eye glasses and a hat. "This is The Honourable Judg- Well, I'll let you name it."

Of course I take it. It's nice, and fun to hug. "Thank you, Mistress Remilia!"

She smiles at me more. "And its limbs have been reinforced so you'll be less likely to break one off during normal play. I also had Patchouli magically eliminate the germs and allergens from it, so it shouldn't pose any sort of health risk."

I see that there are patches on the dolly's armpits and neck, and where where the legs attached to the torso. They seem stronger, but they're just as soft as other parts of the dolly, so it's fine.

"Umm..." Watch says 3:40:09. "But, um. What did you do with the viceroy?"


I manage a nod. Viceroy Sassypants was my first dolly, and we didn't get to spend too much time together before she went in for preemptive doll surgery.

"Very well," Mistress says. "I shall go retrieve it for you. I imagine the relevant maids should be finished reinforcing its joints."
Two dollys! Wow! How'd I ever get so lucky?

Mistress Remilia doesn't say anything as she leads the way to the maid barracks.

She doesn't even knock when she walks into the door. Watch says 3:44:48.

She asks a maid how she's doing and they talk for a bit.

When watch says 3:47:41, I have the Viceroy back!

I hug the Viceroy (along with my new dolly). They're both nice, and soft.

"Thank you, Mistress!"

"Of course, Sakuya."

And it looks like the Viceroy got reinforced joints too. Maybe that's a big consideration for dollys? I hadn't really thought about it too much before, and its not like I'd be an expert or anything.

Mistress Remilia smiles as we leave the barracks and go our separate ways. I guess if Flandre's hanging out with her new friend, I can hang out with mine.

"Sakuya," says Mistress.

Ummm.

When I turn, Mistress Remilia smiles. "I and the other permanent residents of the mansion like to meet for tea every so often, to catch up and discuss the mysteries of life- existence. Would you care to join us this afternoon?"

"Um," Watch says 3:49:24. "Can I bring my stuffed animals?"

Mistress Remilia's smile shifts, a little. "It's not really that kind of party."

"Oh. Um," I guess I'll have time to play with my new friend later. It's not like time is something I don't have a lot of, in the long run, haha. "Well, let me drop them off in my room."
So I'm at the door to the tea room. Watch says 3:58:29. So I'm 0:01:31 early, without even having to do time stuff.

The door isn't as fancy as the one to Mistress Remilia's chambers was, but it's still a little intimidating.

The tea room- or at least, the one Mistress and her friends are using- is pretty cool. It's in the middle of the mansion, except, somehow, it gets sunlight from two angles, which makes the shadows pretty cool. It's also regular, orange evening sunlight, even though the windows are black and the curtains are pink.

(The origin of light coming in from two different directions could be a refraction of light around a gravitational lens. Or, a series of lenses, since having just one large gravity well produce that steep an angle would probably have other noticeable side-effects. And that would also explain why it looked like sunset light, since sunsets are a different colour and stuff because of the angle the shine in. I think.

Well, it could be a series of regular lenses, but the gravity distortion would be consistent with the non-euclidean nature of the mansion's geometry.

And, well, you know, it could just be magic. But that wouldn't be fun.)

There's a fancy tea table out in the center of the room. Mistress Remilia is there- standing out of her seat. There's also Ms. Hong, Lady Knowledge, and, ugh, stupid Koakuma.

"Sakuya," Mistress Remilia says. She stands up and waves to an empty seat at the table. "Come! Have a seat."

"Um. Okay." Watch says 4:00:20.

"It's been so long, with just Patchouli, Meiling, and myself," says Mistress Remilia, "And now we've got two new residents in the past three months. It's delightful."

I glare at Koakuma. She glares back.

"Sakuya," Mistress Remilia says.

"Um! Yes?"

"Would you care to help me with the tea?"

"O-okay!"
The tea set is a ways away, out of earshot of the other attendees. Mistress Remilia starts arranging a ceramic tea set and an assortment of white bags.

"I do like to steep my tea myself, sometimes," Mistress Remilia says. "Having a maid do it is a status symbol of course, but there is a certain satisfaction I find in the preparation, and in the ability to control the nuances of flavor based on my own actions."

"Okay."

"I mention this because I want to share with you something that brings me solace, not because I expect you to learn the specifics of tea preparation as part of your duties."

I had sort of thought that was it. "Oh! Okay."

"See, I do enjoy the flavor of chamomile in general, but the specifics of preparation affect the crispness or the sweetness can be controlled based on the water temperature and how long you steep it." Mistress Remilia gracefully plucked a few tea bags into a strainer and dipped them into a kettle. Steam wafted off the kettle water, so it was probably boiling. "And of course, you have a much finer control over the flavor during the bagging process, but I've prepared today's tea months ago, and we're not going to get into the specifics of preparation today, aha."

"Aha."

In the end, I don't really do anything except watch Mistress Remilia steep the tea and help her carry the trays to the table, but I guess it was educational.

The tea is really yummy! Everyone takes a cup and adds a different amount of sugar and honey to it, but I just took it as it was.

I try my best to imitate what Ms. Remilia does when she takes a sip from her cup. Ms. Hong and Lady Knowledge are kind of sloppy, and there's no way I'm going to take social cues from stupid Koakuma.

People give Mistress Remilia compliments on the tea and they talk about something to do with the mansions' finance and something about the nearby human town. It's not really something I know a lot about. Watch says 4:05:52.

"So, you really like watches, Sakuya?" asks Mistress Remilia.

I almost drop gramma's watch- that would have been really bad. "Oh! Um...."

"It's fine that you are. But we all want you to feel included, so don't hesitate to speak up, about anything."

"Oh! Ok." Well, I don't really know what exactly to say....

"Young people and technology, huh?" Miss Hong says.

"It does appear that the young are more vested in technology," Lady Knowledge says.
"And humans have a little trouble intuiting the passage of time," stupid Koakuma says.

When nobody but Koakuma's looking, I stick my tongue out at her. She flinches, but doesn't spill her tea.

Mistress Remilia says, "And it is funny, in the ironic sense; we came to this world to avoid an increasingly technological society, but some parts of it were just too convenient to leave behind, huh?"

"Oh, is that why you accepted Yukari's offer?" Lady Knowledge says.

"It was a part of it," Mistress Remilia says. She sips her tea, and that reminds me to do that too, "I did feel the world was going too fast, and not just technologically. The opportunity to live in a world without the pressures of progress. Perhaps it's a nobility thing."

Lady Knowledge tilts her head and nods at the same time. "For me, it was but you knew that."

Mistress Remilia nods. "And how about you, Meiling?"

Ms. Hong shrugs and makes a face. "Honestly, I don't know why I do anything."

That's funny! Except everyone looks at me when I laugh, and that's not so funny. Watch says 4:09:23.

"So how about you, Koakuma?" Mistress Remilia says, "How are you enjoying your stay at the Scarlet Devil Mansion, and in general, the physical world?"

"The 'physical' world, yes," stupid Koakuma says. She chuckles, and it's annoying. "See, 'physics' is just applied math, so the 'physical' world is the applied math world, and it has certainly been an experience."

"Maybe one day you'll actually apply math yourself, instead of just thinking about theories."

Stupid Koakuma glares, for just a bit, "Of course. But I find a working understanding of theories helps you understand exactly what you can and cannot do."

Stupid Koakuma, grr. Watch says 4:10:06.

"She does have an excellent grasp of geometry," says Lady Knowledge, and she turns to her familiar "Perhaps that's why you've taken to the study of magic so readily."

And they all start talking about magic and stuff, and that's not really something I know a lot about. Watch says 4:10:40.

Mistress Remilia, Lady Knowledge and Ms. Hong start talking about something or something. And that's fine with me, since I can just drink more tea and I don't need to try to think of things to say. Watch says 4:32:17.

And stupid Koakuma glances at me. I make sure to glare back at her.
And Koakuma leans over to me, and she holds out her cup so I can see into it.

"You want to see something weird?" Koakuma says.

"I already am." Haha! That was a good one.

Koakuma looks at me for a moment. Then she gestures to her cup. "When you stir a cup of tea," she stirs her cup of tea, "All the tea leaves bunch up in the center, even though you'd expect them to gather at the edges do to the centrifugal force you induce via stirring."

"Centrifugal force isn't real."

"Surely you of all people should understand transposition across reference frames," Koakuma says, "Simply construct the laws of motion in a rotating environment and you'll see that it has to exist."

"That's just the normal or tensile force required to offset the outward component of angular momentum to maintain a rotating thingy."

"That- yes, that is literally what the centrifugal force is," Koakuma says.

"But it's not real. It's just a made up word to describe a specific circumstance that looks like something it's not."

Stupid Koakuma looks like she's laughing at me. Stupid! "That is, like, 90% of Math. Are you certain you understand the field?"

"Well, maybe that's what it's like for math people, but in the physical world we don't need to make up words like that."

Koakuma sighs like she's annoyed. Success! "I don't know why we're arguing about this, this should be one area where theory and observation agree."

Maybe she's right, but I'm not going to tell her that. "Well, nyeh."

"Nyeehhh~"

"I see you two are having fun," Lady Knowledge says.

Koakuma sits up straight. "Oh. Yes. Of course."

And after the tea party finishes, Mistress Remilia asks me if I'd like to help her clean up, and that's straightforward at least.
Keeping time time time, in a sort of runic rhyme....

It used to be, you woke up when the sun came out. or earlier, if you that was necessary to your profession, or just something you wanted to do for that day-

Anyway, the point was, waking up used to be, like, intuition. And so was lunchtime, and dinnertime, and bedtime.

But with clocks, you could wake up at the same time everyday, and you could designate only an hour for lunch. With clocks, you were able to have a Schedule.

And everyone else was also able to have a Schedule. And you could Synchronize Your Schedules, to work as a team, to be a more productive citizen.

And also, with clocks, you were also able to be Behind Schedule. I've never been Behind Schedule, since I became a maid, and with my powers, it'd be hard to be behind if I stay aware of the time.

But if I forget to do something, there's nothing I can do to be On Schedule again. Except maybe try to catch up, but there's lots of adults who got Behind Schedule when they were younger and are still trying to catch up, so I want to avoid that.

Watch says 6:59:56. Clock says 7:00:03.

I count to four. Watch says 7:00:00. Clock says 7:00:07, so we're in sync. I adjust my watch to the clock though, since the only way schedules work is if everyone's clocks say the same thing.

The workday is fine, again. There wasn't anything cool like repair a clock or help Miss Hong with gardening today, and since I'm looking forward to the afternoon it feels like it goes slower than normal. I had made sure it wasn't because I was actually going slower through time, though- that'd be bad.

After I finish everything, I do a quick time-stop at my room to pick up both my dollys and then run back to the hallway next to the maid quarters, so that Flandre can bump into me at the usual place. She likes to 'surprise me', at around 3:00:00 PM every day- give or take about 0:30:00- to ask if I want to hang around and stuff. It's pretty nice, and I'm sure Flandre will be excited to meet the Honorable Judge Barkhowser and reunite with Viceroy Sassypants.

Watch says 2:32:58, so Flandre's On Schedule to bump into me as I finish up my work. She usually floats down and smiles and sings a thingy.

Hey Hey, Sakuya Sakuya, C'mon, let's go and play~....
And I go through a few iterations of that ditty, but um-

Flandre doesn't show up.

Watch says 2:58:31.

Well, it would make sense that Flandre would sometimes have other things to do.

I mean, hanging out with a random maid mustn't be too high on her priorities. Like, if something else came up, she'd probably have to take care of that instead.

Watch says 3:00:02.

But. Um.

Maybe it's fine if I try to find her?

Watch says 3:04:40. I'm at the door to Flandre's room, at the bottom of the mansion. Even though the door is really big, it's not too scary.

Um. I don't know if I'm supposed to just open the door. Flandre has different preferences than her sister....

But once I knock, it opens. Maybe the doors are on a fulcrum, with a perfect counter-balance, so the knock was enough to send it open? Or maybe there's some machinery around, like with clock weights and stuff.

Flandre lives at the bottom of a deep pit with a stairwell around the sides, in like this cool dungeon thingy with black bricks everywhere, with not enough light to see the edges. It's kind of cozy and a bit scary.

But she lives waaaay down at the bottom of the stairwell, so I can't see if she's there or not from here. "Um. Hello?"

"Hey, Sakuya!" calls Flandre, from the abyss, "It's nice to see you! Come on down!"

It's a long walk down all the stairs, and I don't want to keep them waiting, so I hit pause on the world real quick.

Flandre's there, but so is someone else. There's this green-haired Youkai, in a tan wide-sleeve dress, with a really nice black hat and a third eye with a position vector defined by nondeterministic dynamical parameters.

"Um!"

"Hey Sakuya" Flandre says. Her teeth are pointy. "So, this is Koishi." Flandre waves to her new friend.

Koishi tips her hat. "Charmed, truely."
"Oh! Um. Same." I don't have a hat to tip, so I just curtsey.

"Koishi, this is Sakuya, the coolest maid in the mansion."

Koishi looks at me. "Is she?"

"Um! If Flandre says so...."

Flandre smiles and gestures to my hands. "I see you rescued Viceroy Sassypants! That's pretty cool."

"Oh! Um, Mistress Remilia gave her back to me, after reinforcing her joints. I guess that's a concern with stuffed animals?"

"Aging is a part of life," Flandre says. "Perhaps that is a little goche, coming from an ageless vampire, but growth and decay are two sides of the same coin. Stuffed animals wear away, just like we will wear away, in time."

Koishi looks kind of sad. "Is forgetting a part of that decay?"

"Perhaps," Flandre says. She waves her hand, "For how can you make new memories, or re-experience old ones?"

Koishi smiles with her mouth closed. "I guess I can live with that."

Flandre turns back to me and leans in and waves the air. "And besides- if our stuffed animals didn't wear away, we'd never need to get new ones!"

"Um, okay..." Watch says 3:16:14. "So, um. What are you guys doing?"

"Well," Flandre rubs the back of her head, "We did a little rough-housing, before, but we're done now."

I hadn't noticed the scorch marks and rubble before. Someone will probably have to re-lay those tiles.

"But we can have a tea party!" Flandre says. "Why don't you join us? You can introduce us to your new friend." She gestures to Barkhouser.

"Oh! Um, this is the Honourab-"

"Wait wait- we should do this properly- with a formal tea party!" Flandre waves her hands.

"Some formality might be fun," Koishi intones.

"I'll get a maid to bring us tea." Flandre stands up and spreads her wings. "You want some tea, Koishi?"

"Sure!" Koishi says.

"Um. I'm a maid...." Watch says 3:23:05

Flandre floats back down. She looks kind of concerned. "I didn't mean it like, you were a bad maid. You're a good maid, Sakuya." Flandre pats my head. It's nice!

"I- thank you!"
"I meant that this afternoon, you shouldn't consider yourself a maid, but a guest. Let's have some tea, for both you and Koishi, and we can, like, do tea party stuff."

"Um- Ok!"

Flandre spreads her wings and hops, twice, before taking off up to the mansion.

And that just leaves me and a strange Youkai together, alone. And I didn't see if her teeth were pointy or not. Watch says 3:24:19.

Well, a good maid is polite. "So. Um. Who- how are you?"

"Flandre and I are both powerful, murderous youkai," Koishi says, suddenly, "It would make sense for us to know each other, and to bond over all the shared experiences that entails."

"Um...." Watch says 3:24:35.

"So the question is, why is Flandre friends with you?"

That- yeah, I guess that's a good question. "I- I don't know. She's- she's really cool." Watch says 3:24:46.

"She is. But is she cool in the way you, as a human and a child, should find cool?"

"I- I don't know." Watch says 3:24:58.

"Or maybe I should ask, what makes you with to be friends with her?"

"She's- she's, um. She's cool."

I hear Koishi breath, this time. "Maybe you should think about it."

I. Um. Hmm.

Flandre floats back down, after an eternity, even though watch says it only took 0:02:48. "So! Tea will be here in like five minutes. Are you ready to party, tea style?"

"I- um, maybe I should come back some other time-"

"What?" Flandre bites her bottom lip. One of her fangs pokes out. "You don't want to hang out today?"


"Did you say something to her?" Flandre asks Koishi.

"Just some existential questions." Koishi waves the air.

"Well, that's no fun!" Flandre laughs. "We should be doing nice, fun things to distract ourselves
from the inevitable existential horror inherent to existence— I've got tons of stuffed animals we can have a tea party with, and we can sing songs and stuff— does any of that sound good?"

I think that sounds really good, but Flandre already knows that.

Koishi furrows her brow. "I- sure."

Flandre tilts her head. "Are you sure sure, or are you just saying yes because you want to hang out?"

Koishi smiles with the right half of her face. Her teeth are flat. "Well, if you and Sakuya like it, then I don't mind."

"Sakuya did bring her dolls along to play with." Flandre gestures to the Judge and the Viceroy, "But if you don't want to have a stuffed animal tea party, we should do something else."

"I- um, I can come back tomorrow-"

"No no, Sakuya— you're both my friends and I want you both to have fun if we hang out...."

Koishi looks at me. "Well, does she like murders?"

"Not— not really, no."

"How about— hmmm," Koishi taps her chin, "Actually, a lot of my hobbies are murder-adjacent."

"Hey, mine too!" Flandre says.

"I guess I like baking," Koishi says.

"I— I'm not old enough to use the kitchen." Watch says 3:30:46.

"And you don't like pondering the mysteries of existence."

"Nnnnnnooo...."

"Wait!" Flandre jumps over to Koishi, "You like pranks, right?"

Koishi smiles at the floor. "I do."

"And Sakuya hasn't objected when I've conscripted her to help sabotage the mansion and its residents..."

"Oh! Um, actually, I think I might like that, depending on who we prank."

Koishi glances over into the distance and then smiles. "I suppose that could be entertaining."

"Well then let's go!" Flandre says, and she grabs both my hand and Koishi's hand, "Woo, Friendship pranks!"
Dancing.

Dancing, swirling, waltzing, waving arms and rolling her head. The act of moving in a deliberate fashion, for recreation.

There was Dancing, back in Koakuma's old world- or at least, something analogous enough that manipulating her meat puppet to pose and gyrate came naturally and induced an intrinsically, inexplicably pleasing reaction in herself.

This second, Koakuma had visitors.

It was the other lady Scarlet, leading two others;

There was her friend with components in the complex plane- a youkai who stood thirty percent taller than Flandre, with a magnificent hat that absorbed most wavelengths of light, adorned with a bow that emitted photons at a wavelength of 580 nanometers, and she had a third ocular with a position vector defined by non-deterministic dynamical parameters.

And there was the new maid Sakuya Izayoi, the baby human and the one to displace Koakuma as the most recent permanent resident of the mansion.

(It turned out that humans had something akin to a larval stage, and in general followed a sort of inverted parabola of growth throughout their lives, starting out small, reaching a maximum height, and then as their Body's decayed, slowly shrinking along the vertical plane (though often
expanding in the lateral dimensions). Idly, Koakuma wondered if her own human meat puppet would experience dimension changes during the passage of Time.

Sakuya gave the impression that she might, some day, begin to Understand the underpinnings of reality that Koakuma traversed in, but currently the human stubbornly clung to outdated ideas of mathematical formalism. Rationality also appeared to follow that inverted parabola through life, it seemed.

"Flandre," Koakuma said, by compressing an internal air sack past a pipe with variable-length stretches of meat that caused vibrations to propagate through the medium of the air in patterns that others recognized as 'speech', "You promised me you wouldn't come in here again, for one of your human 'years'."

Flandre extruded her pharyngeal meat organ out of the leftmost limit of her buccal cavity. "If you 'member, I said I wouldn't come in here unless I was accompanied by a maid, aaaaannd-"

Flandre stepped to the side and waved her meat manipulators to the human accompanying her. Sakuya's cranial meat bobbed, slightly.

"Ah," Koakuma said. "What a clever loophole."

'Loopholes' where what mortals called it when they used logic to create a power imbalance in Faustian deals by exploiting the fact that contracts had to be translated into Words, and the nature of mortal Words had a high degree of entropy. It was what made them so dangerous, and why Koakuma, personally, had never tried to make deals with humans. She had to remember to add 'vampires' to that prohibition as well.

"But anyway," Flandre said, "We're here to prank you!"

"Teeheehee," Koishi said.

"Heeheehee," Flandre said.

"We-we're not supposed to tell her that~" Sakuya said.

"Nah, it's okay," Flandre said, "Kuki likes to think of herself as a prank martyr, bravely throwing herself on our pranks to protect the sorceress who enslaved her to this dimension."

"That is correct," Koakuma said. "I am also unperturbed by most mortal means of incapacitation. Also, my appelation is 'Koakuma'."

"Anyway," Flandre wobbled a meat manipulator in the direction of Koishi, "We made you a cookie, for cookie roulette! Get it? Because you're 'Kuki'?

Flandre induced an angle into her posture and spoke in the direction of Sakuya and lowered her voice, but not beyond the range of Koakuma's perception. "I said that with an accent to make the words homophones, since 'Kuki' usually has a long 'u' sound."

"Um," Sakuya said, "Okay...."

Koakuma decided not to press the linguistic line of argument. "Only one cookie?"

Koishi's cranial eyeballs rotated to face upwards and she revealed her smile bones. "Well, roulette does usually involve six different things, but we got hungry and ate all the good ones."
"Heeheehee," Flandre said.

"Um-ahaha~" Sakuya said.

"And it's especially appropriate," Flandre said. She revealed her smile bones, especially the tapered and elongated one, "Because the cookie will make you kooky, Kuki!"

Flandre induced an angle into her posture and spoke in the direction of Sakuya and lowered her voice, again. "I said that without the accent because the double 'o's in 'kooky' have a long 'u' sound."

"Um," Sakuya said again, "Okay...."

"If it will expedite your leave," Koakuma said. She grasped the cookie with her rightmost meat manipulator, "I shall consume your 'cookie'."

"Yay~" Flandre said.

Koakuma masticated the cookie. It delighted the interlopers.

"So what was this supposed to be?" Koakuma said, evoking the sound waves around the presence of hydrogenated grain product in her buccal cavity. "Acid? Poison? Acidic poison? Licorice?"

Flandre reached into the smooth, continuous storage space known as her 'pocket' and procured a Device With A Button On It. "Nah, we put a lunarian fuzzy logic engine in there. 'kuya figured it'd mess with your logic abilities, since that's based on, like, math stuff."

"Oh," Koakuma said, before Flandre Pushed The Button and what the mortals called her 'math stuff' start ded fawhuyih3qwdjvww2qiodosal

//-------------------------------///

///

/////  

///-------------------------------///

01001011 01101111 01100001 01101011 01110101 01101101 01100001 01101101 01110101 01000000 01100000 01101100 01110101 00100000 01100010 01101001 01101110 00100000 01110100 01101000 01101111 01101011 01100111 01101000 01110102  

Koakuma became unstuck in thought.

No longer did reactions follow events in a logical, prescribed manner, but instead waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
"Woaaaah-" Koakuma emitted- or tried to say- as she tried to remember the process of pushing air around her internal cavities to generate specific vibrations.

"waiodhsio-"

After one or more seconds, however, Koakuma managed to adapt her 'speech' to her current state.

"What- what's going on?" she emitted. Koakuma 'heard' herself emit those sounds; the feedback was automatic, and she sounded different.

"Looks like you were right, Koishi," said Flandre, "She's using her brain, now."

"Toldya," said Koishi, "It's like, you have a thinking organ right there, so I figured she'd use it as an emergency retreat if her mind became compromised."

Koakuma raised her- yes, those words felt right- rightmost meat manipulator. It just took a little practice, but in one or more seconds she was able to adapt from 'manipulating a meat puppet' to 'moving her Body', as she now appreciated the distinction.

Ever since she started Existing, Koakuma's meat puppet had all sorts of signals available to her perceiving self- pressure, temperature, balance, proprioception- and Koakuma had started making use of them more and more, but-

But like, now, all of them came to her perception in unison, simultaneously, and she didn't have to actively ping any of her senses for a status update- she just knew, all of it at once- like for example, she was receiving pain signals from her left foot, where she had broken it the previous day, and she was receiving audio signals, and she was lying on her back, since her balance sensors were reporting gravity pulling behind her- and she was staring at the ceiling- and when she covered her ocular organs with her eye lids, she was still receiving sight signals, it was just all black, which certainly did take up less computational power than when they were Open, but not as much as if she had simply decided to temporarily stop receiving visual information. She could feel all the evidence of her meat sub-processes- she could feel her meat blood-pump beating blood though her Body, and her meat oxegenator pumping air in and out through her throat, and she felt the acidic digestive juices churning about her internal food sack, and the continuous drip of mucilaginous solution down her esophagus and the flapping of her aural membranes when she unhinged her
The biggest change was that she could smell, now-

Of course, she had been aware that her nasal cavity responded to ambient chemicals in the air emitted by various substances, and occasionally she had pinged that avenue of perception in the course of her second-to-second Existence, but like, now, she couldn't turn it off. She was, continuously and without prompting, smelling the dust and old parchment and weathered mahogany of the library's books and shelves and general being, and she could smell the scent of her clothes, and of the continuous decay of the dermal coating of her meat body-

It was all hella disgusting, yo.

"Is she okay?" said Sakuya.

Koishi revealed her smile bones. "I guess, since you just smushed your consciousness into an unfamiliar new storage system, it's not entirely out of the question that you might have a very minor case," Koishi held up two of the smaller fractal appendages on the end of her left meat manipulator, "Of serious brain damage."

Koakuma felt a new sensation- but not a sensory sensation. Upon further introspection, it was what must have been what the smooth continuous denizens of this plane called 'humour'.

"Teeheehee," Koakuma emitted. It seemed appropriate.

"What's so funny?" Flandre said.


"Ah- I guess that is pretty funny," Koishi said.

Koakuma gestured to Sakuya, "And you- you spent your entire life being meat."

Sakuya tilted her head to a negative angle in relation to the Horizontal. "Is- is that wrong?"

"No, it's just, you think." Koakuma's new meat brain wasn't quite able to explain why that was funny. "With meat. Like, whenever you use your brain."

Sakuya oscillated, and Flandre stepped forward, between Koakuma and the human, "Hey, I use my brain too," Flandre said.

Koakuma flapped her right meat manipulator. "Oh, you think so?"

Flandre laughed, and then she glared.

"That wasn't to imply that I don't believe you can think," Koakuma said, "I meant that, I hypothesize that youkai are some kind of metaphysical sentience imbued in a meat body- and a human meat body at that," Koakuma said, "And wouldn't you know, humans form the template for the bodies of all youkai, no matter how powerful the youkai is!"

"And you humans- they a- you are no pushovers either," Koakuma oscillated her leftmost 'arm'
towards the human in her audience. Sakuya seemed perturbed at the gesture. "You communicate by slapping meat together, and by whistling air past meat strings." Koakuma demonstrated. "And you've created all sorts of Devices- clothes to keep yourselves warm, books to remember things for you, wheels to more efficiently translate force along the Horizontal,-"

Koakuma Closed Her Eyes. It allowed her to reallocate processing power to trying to discern what it was that was so funny about meat. She did not succeed.

"It's just- you are entirely made of meat! And now I am too! Teeheehee-"

That second, Sakuya started 'crying', which was what the denizens of this world called it when they went limp, emitted a high-pitched, low frequency whine, and extruded lachrymal fluid from their oculars.

Flandre and Koakuma stepped away, but Koakuma's latent human herding instincts prompted her to Open Her Eyes and then flop her Body towards the baby human and pull Sakuya in for what was called a 'hug'.

"I'm sorry," Koakuma emitted, with a cadence she hoped was soothing."I'm sorry, I'm sorry-"

That seemed to ease Sakuya's distress, so Koakuma continued her set of actions, up to the eventuality where empirical evidence prompted her to look for an alternative solution.

Luckily, that hypothetical eventuality never arrived, despite the apparent diminishing returns of 'hugging' and Continuously Apologizing Despite Not Offering Concrete Solutions To The Current Problem.

At some second, Sakuya ceased emitting noise and she stopped oscillating.

"Now now," Koakuma emitted, "Why don't you tell me what upset you, so that it can be made right?"

Sakuya took a few seconds to be ready to vocalize.

"It's just," Sakuya said. She sniffled, "I thought you were different."

Sakuya sniffled again, wiping her nasal protrusion on her left meat manipulator- which Koakuma was grateful for, because Sakuya's face had at some point started leaking mucilaginous solution.

"It's just- I know that most youkai just think of humans as being- as being meat- and I should just get used to that but-"

Sakuya sniffled one more time. "Even though we fight all the time, I thought that- that you thought I was special. That you thought of me as a person. As not just a piece of meat."

"Oh. Oh!" Koakuma emitted. She reaffirmed her 'hug'. "I'm sorry. I should have been more cognizant of what my words meant, and how my words would affect you. I'm sorry."

Sakuya returned the 'hug', then, to a very slight degree. "Even though we fight all the time, I thought that- that you thought I was special. That you thought of me as a person. As not just a piece of meat."

"How about," Koakuma emitted, "I internally re-conceptualize what I used to call 'meat' as 'flesh'?"

"That's," Sakuya visibly cogitated, "That's a little better, I guess, though, though not completely...."

"How about 'bloodbag'?" (Flandre seemed to like that one)
"Nooo~" Sakuya said, "That's gross!"

"Or what about- 'viscera'," Koakuma emitted, "It is just as inaccurate as 'flesh' or 'meat'."

"That's still kind of gross...."

"Then how about 'goop'?"

Sakuya giggled. "Okay. That's funny."

Koakuma did some mental reassociation.

"If it's any consolation," Koakuma emitted, "My species doesn't consume the meat of a human."

"And just so you know," Flandre said, "Nobody in the mansion would ever consider eating you, Sakuya. Remi and I will make sure of it."

"O-okay," Sakuya said, though Koakuma did not think she sounded convinced.

One or more seconds passed, and Koakuma then thought she understood that urge to 'prank' someone- that combination of mischievousness, curiosity, and sense of deriving entertainment value from provocation.

"Teeheehee," Koakuma emitted, "So you thought that I thought that you were special?"

Sakuya's face instantaneously tinted redwards, "No~. That's dumb. You're dumb. Dummy!"

Koakuma felt humour. "Oh, am I?"

"Yeah!" Sakuya pouted, "You're dumb and you should feel dumb."

"Perhaps," Koakuma emitted, "It is in fact you that is dumb."

"Well, then you're dumber!" Sakuya said, "You're dumb times infinity!"

Koakuma felt a deeper sense of humour, that second. "Well in that case," she emitted, "Your 'dumb' quality, in contrast to mine, has a one to one correspondence to all existing real numbers."

Sakuya tilted her head to the side. "So? That's not bigger."

"Sure it is. Allow me to explain." Koakuma released her 'hug', and Sakuya stood up and stepped back, and Koakuma flopped her Body upwards to ambulate towards and procure the nearest chalkboard.

"Suppose that we have a series of sequences of natural numbers," Koakuma emitted.

"I refuse," Sakuya said.

"Suppose anyway," Koakuma emitted. "Now, suggest a series of random digits."

Sakuya folded her arms together, though Flandre and Koishi obliged Koakuma in constructing seven sequences of random numbers.
\[ S_1 = \begin{array}{cccccccc} 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & \end{array} \]
\[ S_2 = \begin{array}{cccccccc} 3 & 7 & 2 & 7 & 2 & 9 & 1 & \end{array} \]
\[ S_3 = \begin{array}{cccccccc} 0 & 0 & 4 & 3 & 4 & 6 & 5 & \end{array} \]
\[ S_4 = \begin{array}{cccccccc} 5 & 8 & 9 & 1 & 2 & 4 & 4 & \end{array} \]
\[ S_5 = \begin{array}{cccccccc} 0 & 6 & 5 & 1 & 6 & 2 & 0 & \end{array} \]
\[ S_6 = \begin{array}{cccccccc} 4 & 1 & 4 & 9 & 5 & 4 & 8 & \end{array} \]
\[ S_7 = \begin{array}{cccccccc} 7 & 6 & 5 & 4 & 3 & 2 & 1 & \end{array} \]

"Now let's make a number out of the diagonal numbers in each sequence. We'll call it 'T'."
S₇ = 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

T = 1741641

"And we'll increase every digit in T by one, and call the resulting number T'."

T' = 28527512

"You notice that this number isn't on the list; it fact, it cannot be on the list, since first digit of T' is different from the first digit of S₁, and the second digit of T' is different from S₂, et cetera. Since increasing every digit in T' by definition means that T' will differ from every digit of Sₙ in it's nᵗʰ digit, we can be certain that T' can never exist on the list."

"This is true for every operation we can do to each digit in T, thus, we can be sure that for any list of numbers we create, no matter how big the list is, there will be an infinite amount of numbers that are not on the list."

Sakuya frowned. "Well what if I just write '28527512' at the bottom of your list?"

"Then you'd have to come up with an eighth digit for it, and then whatever that eighth digit of that number ends up as will differ from the eigth digit of T' by one."

(Flandre and Koishi had long since stopped appearing to pay attention to Koakuma's explanations, yet they both appeared to be enjoying the spectacle.)

Sakuya was silent for one or more seconds, and then she said, "So, what?"

"So, no matter how big you make the list, there will always be numbers not on that list." Koakuma emitted, triumphantly. "And your infinity is the numbers on the list, and mine is the the set of numbers on the list as well as not on the list, so my infinity is bigger."

"Who says my infinity is the list?" Sakuya said. "And besides, the point is moot, since infinity is the biggest number so you can't get bigger infinities."

Koakuma lost the capability of speech, for a second. "But- I just demonstrated that infinities can be larger or smaller relative to one another."

Sakuya revealed her smile bones in a way that suggested she thought she was victorious. "See, it looks like you just have a poorly defined notion of infinity," Sakuya said.

"Wha- I just defined my notion of infinity," Koakuma emitted.
"Well maybe you shouldn't have defined it wrong~"

"Well, if infinity is the biggest number, what's infinity plus one?"

"It's just infinity," Sakuya said, "It's the biggest number."

"But if you perform a simple addition property to it you clearly get a larger number."

"Well maybe infinity isn't subject to the same rules," Sakuya said.

Koakuma was unable to resist the urge to oscillate her arms, above her. "Oh, you think that because space-time operates under different parameters under extreme positions that the entirety of math does as well?"

"Uh, yeah?" Sakuya said, "Math is supposed to represent the real world, so what's the point of math that doesn't match space-time in extreme conditions?"

The argument continued for what was definitely many, many seconds.

Nearby, Flandre and Koishi appeared very amused.

At some point, after negotiating a stalemate with Sakuya, Koakuma then created a distraction and made an excuse to seek out Mistress Patchouli. It was 'funny', that she now felt the need to 'make an excuse' to see Mistress Patchouli, because she wondered how her Flame would appear, now that she was using a goop brain.

Rationally, she expected Flandre, Koishi, and Sakuya to derive entertainment if they observed Koakuma during... whatever it was Koakuma intended to do. But the thought of them intruding upon Koakuma's interaction with her Mistress was inexplicably distasteful. It might warrant further introspection.

The smooth, continuous ambulatory process called 'walking', however, appeared to be more difficult now that she was continuously receiving unmitigatable pain signals from her left foot. And 'balance' seemed to be more difficult as well- she couldn't, just, magically compensate for any imbalance in her posture, since she was inside the body she was directing to move, she had to balance herself entirely with her in-built muscles.
And halfway to the library's study, Koakuma was intercepted.

And there was Koishi, the consciousness youkai, if Koakuma's conclusion was correct.

"Oh," Koakuma emitted, "Hello, Koishi. I though you were wi-"

Koishi's remaining eyes emitted light and she lunged forward. Her right goop manipulator curled around Koakuma's cranium, and she emitted, "Nan iChir Gelair!"

Koakuma felt her Thoughts become laid bare to the interloper-

And-

Nothing really happened.

Koakuma blinked.

"To what end did you do- whatever it was you did?"

"Well, you have a brain now," Koishi said. She kept her goop manipulator in contact with Koakuma's cranium. "A meat brain, as you said. So I figured it was likely that you had developed some sort of subconscious, as a result."

Koakuma processed that information. "Perhaps. Were you correct?"

"It's a little weird, but I think I'm figuring it out."

Koakuma processed that information. "And why was that of interest to you?"

"I figured I could erase myself from your memory."

"And you would do that- to what end?"

Koishi's resolve appeared to falter. "Because- nobody remembers me." She appeared profoundly sad, that second.

"Is this," Koakuma emitted, "A desirable circumstance for you?"

Koishi's resolve appeared to falter further. "I- I mean, I guess- usually. But...."

After one or more seconds of silence, Koakuma decided to prompt Koishi for the remainder of her explanation.

"'but'...." Koakuma emitted.

"It- it's just," Koishi said. She retracted her goop manipulator, and she rotated and flopped onto the ground. "It doesn't seem fair."

Ah, 'Fairness' was what the smooth, continuous notion that existence operated under some formal system of cause and effect around moral values entertained by a dominant noospherical cultural system.

"Flandre's my- well, she's the most special person in my life," Koishi said. "And it hurts that she can't remember me. And it just doesn't seem fair that a human child or some random math demon
get to remember me more than she does."

Koakuma flopped her own Body down besides the consciousness Youkai.

"I suppose familiarity has bred a certain form of kinship," Koakuma admitted, "And Flandre does not seem to hate you."

"Welp. That's great, huh? That she 'doesn't hate' me?"

"Well, if you believe her feelings towards you will improve upon coexisting with you for a period of time during which she can remember you," Koakuma emitted, "Perhaps Sakuya and I can help remember you for her? While not in totality, Memory has certain transitive properties. I am sure Sakuya would be amenable as well."

Koishi exhaled, audibly. She pulled her third, blinded ocular into her lap and with her remaining oculars looked into the distance, for one or more seconds.

Koakuma waited.

"No," Koishi said, "She's mine."

And she grabbed Koakuma's head and-

- And then Koakuma found her Flame.

It wasn't a momentous occasion or anything- The Scarlet Devil Mansion's resident Magician, Lady Patchouli Knowledge, was conducting her magical research in her study, as per usual; reagents and tomes open at an old mahogany desk with a single candle lighting the room.

She looked up, briefly, when Koakuma entered, and she stood up when Koakuma fell over.

Because upon entering, Koakuma bumped her left foot against a stone tablet, and that hurt. Immensely.
The sensation of Pain Overtook priority over all other perception and thought. Pain Pain pain pain

"Oof." emitted Koakuma, and she reflexively clutched her foot. It did not relieve the pain even a little, but somehow it seemed to help.

And then she felt something on her 'arm'-

And Koakuma Opened Her Eyes, and looked upon the visage of her Flame.

And it was a little dissapointing, honestly.

Patchouli looked the same.

Koakuma wasn't actually sure what she was expecting- perhaps that was her new 'subconscious' developing expectations, filtered through a current interpretation of past experiences.

But she appeared exactly as Koakuma remembered- slight, and frail, a little droopy-eyed and flushed in the cheeks, a little too small for the lavender pajamas she rarely bothered to change out of.

Well, Koakuma's earlier assessment wasn't entirely accurate; right now, Mistress Patchouli's face looked Concerned, as she looked over her familiar.

"Are you okay?" Mistress asked.

"Aha- yeah," Koakuma emitted, and then she realized that it was an accurate statement, because, somehow, she had forgotten her pain, for a moment. It returned when she thought about her foot, though not as intensely as it had in previous seconds. "I just stumbled."

Patchouli tilted her head. "There's something different about you," she said.

"Oh!" Koakuma said, inadvertently, "Aha- it's just a little experiment," she oscillated her 'hand', "I figured I might try out one of those human brains. I mean, you put yours to such good use."

Patchouli laughed, at that- it was such a joyous thing, when viewed holistically, and it evoked a sort of autonomous physiological response in Koakuma's torso goop. "That must be it, then," Patchouli said.

"Yes." Koakuma emitted.

They both sat there, for a few seconds. Or possibly for hundreds of seconds- Koakuma wasn't certain which.

"You smell nice," Koakuma said. And then there was another sort of autonomous physiological response in her Body. She Coughed, only this time it wasn't just her imitating a motion she'd observed other smooth, continuous denizens make when they wanted to fill a silence with noise-
Patchouli smiled. "Thank you. The scent is likely from ground *Pogostemon cablin*. I use it frequently in my rituals."

"Oh. Cool," emitted Koakuma, out of a lack of better things to say. "I suppose I was aware of that. Just maybe not the smell."

"Speaking of which," Patchouli said, "If you are indeed okay, I will return to my experiment."

The Magician stood up, and Koakuma followed suit.

"I- can I help you with anything?" Koakuma emitted, hastily.

"If your foot is hurt, I won't ask you to fetch anything. You ought to rest."

"No no- it's fine." Koakuma waved her arm. "Really. I want to help."

"Well, then," Patchouli said, "Perhaps you can help me with my candle placement?"

Koakuma smiled, and Understood what that meant. "Of course."

"Actually," Koakuma emitted, once her Mistress had concluded her experiment, "I had one request, if you didn't mind."

"As you wish," said Patchouli.

"Would you mind if," Koakuma began, and for some reason she paused, for a second, "we try Dancing, once more?"

Patchouli was silent for far too many seconds. "I suppose.... But what about your foot? Didn't you hurt it?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," Koakuma said, "It doesn't hurt when I look at you."
And what was apparently only very few seconds later, but which felt, pleasantly, like a lot longer- after a period of time which Koakuma decided to keep private- she returned to what the smooth, continuous denizens of this plain called the library's 'foyer', where Flandre and- what was her name again? were just finishing their enactment of a play Koakuma had left them, in order to Cheer Sakuya Up.

It appeared to work; after Flandre's new friend recited the last line of the play, Sakuya slapped her goop manipulators together in what was called 'applause'. Koakuma emulated the action.

"Well, I do believe I've had my fill of this experience," Koakuma emitted, "So if you could kindly turn off the fuzzy logic generator..."

"Oh, we did that ages ago," Flandre said. "Didn't want to cause any real damage, yeah?"

Koakuma supposed inhabiting a human brain means you make human assumptions, but she didn't find herself resentful.

But that did mean there was nothing stopping Koakuma from simply stepping out of her goop brain.

So she did.

///-------------------------------
/////
-------------------------------///

And Koakuma's being became whole.

It was an old and familiar perspective, being in the smooth, continuous curve world but not being of it. Or at least, being somewhere in between being in between the realm of obtuse planes and being the inhabitant of a goop puppet.

She had access to her old facilities of perception and reasoning, and she could block off the pain signals from her foot, now. Koakuma did, however, decide she would regularly ping her olfactory receptors, just to get a better understanding of the world. (And she made a note to herself to check out the mansion's herb garden, at some future second.)

"Well then," Koakuma said, "I'm glad enough to have been able to entertain you, but now you'll need to either check out a library book or get out."

Koakuma contorted her face into that sort of glare she saw people often express in Flandre's presence.

"But- what if we want to prank you more?" Flandre said.

"To what end do you desire to prank me?"
Flandre tilted her cranium down and oscillated her left goop ambulatory organ. "Well, pranking you was the only activity all three of us figured we'd like...."

Koakuma observed Sakuya and the third one. They each raised and lowered their 'shoulders'.

"If you desire entertainment," Koakuma said. She grasped a nearby tome, "You could read a book. Reading can take you on an imagination adventure."

Flandre appeared as if she were about to speak, but she was interrupted by a low-frequency whine.

"Noooo~" said Sakuya, "Reading's dumb. I'm never going to learn to read."

And it was likely a holdover from her time in a goop brain, but that comment induced in Koakuma a latent sense of wounded pride, resentment, and revulsion.

"What." Koakuma said.

Chapter End Notes

I was aiming to write Koakuma as having a sort of Big Sister dynamic with Sakuya, so I hope that came across.
"Bwaahahaha," Flandre said, as Sakuya and Koakuma found something new to argue about. That was how she knew 'kuya and Kuki were friends; because only friends fought like that. Well, like *that* if one of them was way more mortal than the other; maybe in the future once Sakuya got more powerful and they argued she and Kuki would, like, stab each other, the way real friends did.

Actually, that was a little classist; maybe someday, once Sakuya got more powerful and they ended up arguing, she and Kuki would, like, stab each other, they way aristocrats did.

And actually, that also seemed a little distasteful to Flandre, so she decided that Sakuya and Kuki's dynamic was fine the way it was. Just because baby humans and newly-forged-in-this-reality eldritch things didn't show affection the way they did when and where Flandre grew up, didn't mean it was bad.

And speaking of friends- and this was kind of a new feeling, - Flandre, herself, had friends.

Like, of course she'd had trusted allies and stuff in her centuries of existence, but, now that she lived in Gensoukyou, it was as if she had a whole different life, and in this one, she hadn't really had friends before.

There was Koakuma, who always seemed annoyed with her, but who never actually attempted any sort of hostility or something against Flandre, or refused a request from her, or even ratted her out to Remi. (Flandre reminded herself to try to do something to show her appreciation for the math demon, someday.)

And there was Sakuya, who was kind of a first in Flandre's life; young enough that Flandre didn't have to try hard to impress her, but that didn't seem to cheapen the admiration she gave the vampire. It was kind of weird being looked up to, but it made her pseudo-undead heart well up with something akin to pride, and it made Flandre want to deserve the admiration Sakuya gave her.

And then there was Koishi- whom she had just met but whom with she had instantly bonded. Like, seriously, it was weird how much they had in common.

And like, maybe, it was one of those 'crush' things, like, being superficially attracted to someone you just met because of .... different reasons or whatever.

But Koishi was really cool; Strong and powerful, but also really fun, but mature in, like, sort of in an aspirational way, but also in like a 'hanging out with her is fun so she can impart her wisdom to me' kind of way. And it was an interesting revelation to Flandre, but she was kinda into that.

But anyway, right now, Sakuya and Koakuma were having words. Most of those words went over Flandre's head, at least in the order they were spoken, but the vampire did enjoy, vicariously, the...
spirit with which the human and the math demon fought.

Flandre turned her head. She couldn't help but smile. "Well, was this fun for you?"

Koishi pulled her third eye into her hands. She stroked the stitches, idly. "Yeah, this was pretty fun. How'd you get your hands on a fancy moon computer?"

Flandre waved the air. "Well, the exiled moon princess and my sister are, like, in the same secret club or something. And she's cool- she's super violent, and she likes strawberries."

And Flandre and Koishi talked about strawberries, for a while. It was pretty fun.

In the middle of Sakuya and Koakuma's fight, Flandre walked up and put a hand on her favorite human's shoulder. Sakuya stopped talking, and she turned her head back and up, towards Flandre.

"Hey, don't worry about it. I get along fine and I don't know how to read," Flandre said, audaciously.

Koakuma glared at her and struggled to articulate. "Yes you do."

Flandre stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. "Oh, I'm just good at pretending. There's like, a 50% chance I hold the book the right side up whenever I try. I guess I've gotten lucky, for the last few centuries."

Koakuma did something with her face. "You quoted Arestophane's *The Clouds* a week ago."

"Did I? I guess great minds just think alike," Flandre said.

Koishi giggled.

Sakuya looked at her, her eyes wide. "Wow, you got through your whole life so far without learning to read?"

And the weight of the baby human's admiration beat against Flandre's conscience, like a salt sea drowning a talking grasshopper, and was victorious.

"No, I was lying," sighed Flandre. "I guess the jig is up," Flandre said. She shrugged and closed her eyes. "I do know how to read."

"And-" Sakuya looked down, and then looked up, "Has knowing how to read improved your life?"

Flandre cogitated.

Like, reading was another method to squish individual's into a mold, trampling their individuality under a dominant homogeneous cultural structure.

But like, sure, reading was the first step to buying into the dominant societal noosphere, but like, railing against a system when you couldn't gain entry into it wasn't noble or brave, or standing up
for your own individuality. One should at least understand the ills of society before taking up the mantle of anarchy. One needed the ability to make a choice before the choice mattered.

But then again, reading was the primary method of independent learning- and writing of disseminating one's own knowledge. And without either, one would be dependent on the teaching class for all knowledge, and that was the most insidious oppression of all.

Flandre really needed to convince Sakuya to read.

"Well, I can read street signs, and that's always nice to be able to do."

"I can too!" Sakuya insisted. She balled her hands into fists at shoulder level, in determination. "There's usually arrows and stuff."

"Koishi, back me up here," Flandre said. She bowed and stepped back as she pontificated towards Koishi, turning over the stage.

"Eh," Koishi said. She scrunched her mouth to the side. "I mean, if you can read, then you can write, and with that, you can write letters- or at least pass notes to someone." Koishi smiled, wickedly. Even though she didn't have fangs, she had a pretty wicked smile. "But then again, if you don't know how to read, people can always trust that you won't read their messages, so you can make a career as a courier."

"Yeah!" Sakuya said.

Flandre laughed. "Bwahahaha. But you know how to read, don't you, Koishi?"

"Yeah," Koishi said, "I spent a long time thinking I was an introvert, so I'd find myself alone in my quarters with a book or something. But then one day I found out that I prefer talking to people, and I never went back."

Flandre smiled. "Oh that's so weird- me too! I spent a long time thinking, like, I'd prefer to just lounge around in my room playing with my stuffed animals, but then one day I snuck into one of Remi's balls and had a blast (not literally, at least at first). So like, mostly the same, except for me, it was a slower transition into having a social life."

Koishi smiled, "I had clay dolls, but yeah- I did a lot of that too. Did you ever invite people over to help you make up the stories?"

"Yeah, and it was dumb!" Flandre exclaimed.

Koishi's smile wavered (And Flandre felt an inexorable tightness in her gut). "Ah- I actually kind of enjoyed the outside input..."

"Oh huh," Flandre said. She thought hard, real quick. "Well, were they friends of yours, that did this?"

Koishi's smile refreshed. "Yeah, that might have been it, then. I enjoyed Orin's wit and Okuu's imagination."

Flandre breathed a sigh of relief. "Yeah yeah, fo' sho'. Like, I managed to convince Patchi to play, and she tried to put in some weird subplot that wasn't even consistent with the lore."

"Ach," Koishi gritted her teeth.
"I know, right?" Flandre said, and then she remembered that she was supposed to be trying to convince Sakuya to try to read.

"And hey, Sakuya," Flandre said, to Sakuya. The human looked at her, in equal parts expectation and apprehension. "Do you know what would have helped me be able to share a consistent lore with someone else, so that we're better able to play together without breaking immersion?"

"Um," said Sakuya. "W-what?"

Flandre flashed her best smile. "A book!"

Sakuya stuck her tongue out. "Gross!"

"Bwahahaha," Flandre laughed. "I thought you liked making up stories, Sakuya?"

"I- I like to keep them in my head," Sakuya mumbled, to the floor.

Flandre took a breath.

"Well, you like poems, don't you?" said the vampire lord, "What's that couplet you keep muttering under your breath?"

"Um!" Sakuya looked at the ground, and her face reddened. "I- I do.... but um," She bit her lip, "I only like how it sounds. I don't need to be able to read to enjoy them."

Koakuma, however, must have found the revelation as a new angle sufficient enough to press upon. (Ha! Angles.)

"Well if you like poetry," Koakuma said, to Sakuya, "There is at least a countably large quantity of poetry books in the library, available for check out."

"Noooo~" said Sakuya.

"So you see," Koakuma said, "if you learned to read, you could enjoy the poetry we have stored in this space."

"Noooooooo~" Sakuya clutched her face.

"And furthermore," Koakuma continued, unfazed, "the written words upon a page are a representation of the poem itself, so even if you only like the way poems sound, the action of reading evokes the sound of the poetry."

"Noooooooooo~" Sakuya flopped on the ground with her arms out, and she rolled twice. "And that's funny coming from someone who thinks numbers evoke a platonic ideal in some metaphysical plane of reality."

Koakuma frowned, "I would argue it's the same thing; just as, say, transcribing the number '3' evokes the platonic ideal of a triplet quantity, transcribing a poem evokes what you might call the perfect expression of that poem's essence. In such a manner, you won't have to rely on your own mortal faculties to recite the poem; you can glimpse its true form; what the words represent, all merely by reading them."

"Well maybe I don't want to evoke poems. I just want the poems." Sakuya folded her arms.

Koakuma opened her mouth, and then closed her mouth. "So, I can tell that this is going to be one of our arguments where we actually agree on most things but we still end up fighting because of a
"You don't know me," insisted Sakuya. She stuck out her tongue. "And besides, weren't you the one that said mathematics is, like, 99% semantics?"

"Bwaahahaha," Flandre said, as Sakuya and Koakuma found something new to argue about. They were such good friends.

But anyway, right now, Sakuya and Koakuma were having words. Most of those words went over Flandre's head, at least in the order they were spoken, but the vampire did enjoy, vicariously, the spirit with which the human and the math demon fought.

And in the middle of Sakuya and Koakuma's fight, Flandre walked up and put a hand on her favorite human's shoulder. Sakuya stopped talking, and she turned her head back and up, towards Flandre.

"Well, you're going to have to learn to read someday, Sakuya," Flandre said. She smirked. "So it might as well be now. Koishi, grab her arms,"

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooo~" Sakuya said, before she broke free, and then vanished.

"Bwahahaha," Flandre cackled, "C'mon, let's go get her."

Chapter End Notes

Psyche! Sakuya doesn't learn to read this chapter! Ahahahaha.

I had a bit of writer's block, so I wrote a chapter of six short scenes from different perspectives about Sakuya's desire to not learn to read, to like experiment with voiced narratives, but halfway through writing, each scene ended up being like 1000 words long (and 1000 word chapters are short compared to some recent chapters but like three times as long as each of the first five chapters, so, maybe consider this an attempt to return to form), so I decided to split it up. So, hopefully, the next five chapters should get pushed relatively fast.
I guarantee no expertise in or even basic correct knowledge of Chinese Culture, time, or the thought processes of young human girls with time powers living in a world of carnivorous monsters.

I will say, though, that I'm pretty sure Sakuya's interpretation of time is not what is commonly understood to be correct. I figure someone who can manipulate time might see time as a 'time-rate', though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keeping time, time, time, in a sort of runic rhyme...

Time is many things. It is a property of matter. It's an axis, upon which objects can be considered to move. It is a thing that clocks tell you what is.

It's also the vague sense of a unifying theme, or attitude. Like, 'the good old times', where the unifying theme was that they were nice, and a long time ago, or 'the time of troubles', which was a period of Russian history characterized by war, famine, and a succession crisis.

Or, more relevantly, 'time to leave the library, where my friends were colluding to teach me to read', which was pretty self-explanatory.

(I guess I can admit that stupid Koakuma is probably my friend. Like, my worst friend, but since it's not entirely unfun to fight with her, I guess that qualifies her to be my friend, like, technically.)

I hit resume on the world.

I'm outside, behind the mansion, in one of the gardens. The sun is almost setting. Watch says 5:52:43.


After a minute, the floor watch says 5:53:48. Watch says 5:53:47. I make adjustments. Then I move them back about five minutes, which I figure is how long it took to get here. The next time I see a clock, I'll double check.

The sun's bright, even though it's just above the mountains - I guess I sort of got used to not seeing the sun during the day. It'd make sense that a vampire's mansion wouldn't have a lot of windows, and come to think of it, I think it's definitely the case that the rooms with windows that I've been in have artificial sunlight.
It's a little noisier outside, and there's wind and I can feel the heat of the setting sun. There's a bench nearby, so I take a seat, to rest. Watch says 5:53:11.

So, since it's my time off, I can do anything I want, theoretically. I mean, there's a lot I can't actually manage to do, but it's not because I'm not allowed to do them. Like, nobody's stopping me from going into the nearby town, but like, I'm afraid to go alone, so I can't really go.

And I'm fine just hanging around the mansion.

And even though it's normally be fun to hang out with Flandre, reading is dumb and gross, so I'll just hang out here. I'm not really afraid of Flandre and stupid Koakuma and- was there another one?- so I'm just going to hide, just for fun. Sort of like 'hide and seek', except I don't want to get caught, and nobody will eat me if I do get caught.


And I figure, Flandre knows her home pretty well, so she'd probably know the hiding spots inside better than me, so I figured maybe I could just hide out here, outside. And even though Flandre's cool, since she's a vampire or something, she can't find me when I'm in the sun, so, I'll stay out here.

I'm not bored. Really.

Watch says 5:53:45.

.
.
.
.
.
.
.
.
Watch says 6:35:12.

Maybe now would be a good time to do my watch repairs, except since I'm outside it's more likely for dust and dirt to get in, so maybe I shouldn't.

I guess I could watch the sunset. I guess it's pretty cool-

"Hey," says Ms. Hong, who I didn't see walk up to me. She had scared me. "It's 'Sakuya', right?"

"Oh! Um. Yeah...."

"Whatcha doing out here?" says Ms. Hong. She then looks suspicious, "Did Remi send ya to check on me? 'cause I am actually doing work now-"

"Oh! N-no, nobody sent me."

"Okay," Ms. Hong smiles. Her teeth are flat. "So whatcha doing out here, then?"

"Um!...." Watch says 6:36:48.
I guess I shouldn't lie to an adult.

"Um. I'm hiding." Watch says 6:38:31.

Ms. Hong tilts her head to the side and smiles- her teeth are flat. "Whaddija do~"

"N-nothing!"

Ms. Hong smirks. "Is that so?"

Even though what I said is true, I feel guilty. Watch says 6:39:06. "I- I- I got nervous. Flandr- erm, Mistress Flandre and I were hanging out in the library, and she's cool, but like, she had a friend visit and I didn't want to get in the way...."

"Ah. I know that feeling," Ms Hong looks away. "Profession third wheel, here, aha. And we all just call her 'Flandre' or 'Flan', since she doesn't take much stock in titles. I know, you know, I know you know, so don't worry about it."

She had laughed, but I didn't. Maybe I should have? Watch says 6:39:42.

Before Ms. Hong tries to push the issue, I decide to just tell her all of the truth.

"They're- they're trying to teach me to read, but I don't wanna." It feels good to get that off my chest, even though I kind of feel bad for not wanting to learn how to read....

Ms. Hong laughs a lot, at that. I don't know if that's because she's being mean or not....

"Well, if that's your goal, I can respect it." Ms. Hong gestures to the yard. "Feel free to hang out anywhere here as long as you want."

"O-okay! Thanks, Ms. Hong!"

"Oh, wow," Ms. Hong says. She rubs her head. "Speaking of not taking stock in titles, I cant even remember the last time anyone's called me 'Ms. Hong', so why don'tcha just call me 'Meiling', mkay?"

"I'll try Ms. Ho- Meiling." It's kind of weird to say, but I can't refuse a request from an adult.

Ms. Hong lauguhs, but not like in a mean way. She waves the air. "Alrighty. Lemme know if you need anything."

"Y-yeah!"

The outside is nice. I guess I've heard people talk about Ms. Hong being derelict at her job a lot, but it's a big yard, and at least this part looks really nice.

And I mean it; the garden really is beautiful. Like, here, There's a big tree on a hill and there's a field of short grass around and there's flower beds around in front of some hedges that block off other parts of the landscape.
"You did a good job with the garden, Ms. Ho- Meiling."

"Aha~, thanks," Ms Ho says. She looks around. "I- I guess I've been working on it for a long time, so, the effort accumulates, eventually, aha~." I try to give my best smile to her, since I know how hard it can be to accept a compliment. Even though it doesn't make sense that someone as cool as Ms. Hong would have trouble knowing how cool she actually is.

"Well, I think you did a good job," I try to say it as confidently as I can.

"Aww, thank you!" Meiling says. She chuckles, "Speaking of which, I should probably prune the hedges on the west side- you have fun, kiddo."

"O-Okay!"

Eventually, it's time for dinner (It's at 7:00:00, which is 0:03:14 away). Ms. Hong leads the way. Luckily, at least for today, Flandre doesn't take dinner with me and Mistress Remilia and Ms. Hong and sometimes Lady Knowledge, so I don't need to run away to avoid learning how to read.

That night, like most nights, Mistress Remilia visits my room to ask me about my day. And she turns off all the lights and she opens the book she brought with her, to read to me. (Since she can see in the dark, it doesn't hurt her eyes to read without light.) Today, it's in the language I understand, but it's also really nice when she does it in one of her fancy languages.

Like, reading's not gross when Mistress Remilia does it, for me. And its really nice, to fall asleep to someone reading to you.

*Keeping time, time, time, in a sort of runic rhyme...*

They say time's arrow neither stands still nor reverses; it only marches forward.
But the people who say that are silly, because time isn't an arrow; it's more like this wibbly wobbly ball of... of time stuff, that inflects every object, as it moves forward in the time dimension.

Today, when watch says 2:31:43, Flandre intercepts me as I finish up my work. We have a nice conversation, as she leads me to one of the spare bedrooms-

But it turned out it was a trap, since it turned out Flandre was in cahoots with stupid Koakuma, and they were plotting to try to teach me how to read.

But as long as I hit pause on the world before anyone grabs me, I can escape.

So I do.

I hit resume when I'm outside.


After a minute, the floor watch says 2:39:19. Watch says 2:39:21. I make adjustments. Then I move them back about five minutes, which I figure is how long it took to get here. The next time I see a clock, I'll double check.

The outside is nice, like yesterday. This time, I'm on a different side of the mansion, on a hill next to a lake, overlooking the reflection of the sun upon its ethereal waters. It's pretty cool.

Today, the sun is a lot higher in the sky. There's, like, a whole different look to the garden, with this kind of light.

It also looks like it's been tidied up a bit more, too, but maybe that's just because it's lighter, and there's less shadows. I don't really know much about cleaning outside places....

Oh! And Ms. Hong's there too. That's also nice.

"Hey kiddo," Ms. Hong says. She wipes some sweat from her forehead.

"Hello, Ms. Ho- erm, Meiling."

Ms Hong smirks. Her teeth are flat. "Planning to hide out here again today?"

"I-! I mean, um. Y-yeah, um, if you don't mind..."

"Not at all," Ms Hong says, "You can enjoy the gardens any time you wish. And I'm glad you do, since Remi's a little agoraphobic most days, and Patchi's too much of a nerd."

I mean, I knew Lady Knowledge was a nerd, but it seems kind of weird that Mistress Remilia
would be afraid of anything. Or maybe Ms. Hong was just referring to the fact that vampires don't like the sun. "Um- okay, yeah!"

There's another bench on this side of the mansion, so I take a seat and look at the sceneries. Watch says 2:42:51.

There is a little butterfly, skirting the edge of the lake. It's pretty cool.

The lake is stagnant, usually, but there's no buildup of grime or algae on it, so maybe the lake is regularly agitated, and it's not really as stagnant as it appears to be. I wonder if anything happens to it at night....

"Aren't you bored, just sitting around there?" Ms. Hong says.

"Um...." I don't want to lie, but, the answer is; 'sort of'.

"Well, if you're not the reading type, maybe you're the athletic type? I mean, I got a pig bladder, if you want to do some football?"

"Um, m-maybe?...."

So Ms. Hong procures some kind of ball and she leads me down to a big lawn area, that's flat and uncluttered.

And Ms. Hong demonstrates how to kick the ball in the right way in order to make it go the direction you want, and how to kick it so that it lifts off the ground, straight up-

(-And that's so weird, because like, how are you applying vertical momentum to an object that is resting on the ground? By definition the normal to the force imparted by gravity comes from contact with the ground, so there would already be something occupying the space where you'd need to impact the ball to make it go up, so how can you possibly kick a ball to make it go upwards-)
ball go up again, and she bounces it on her shoulders and elbows too.

"So it's not quite a football field, but the space between the hedges over there-" Ms. Hong points to some hedges over there, "Might serve as a good goal, no?

"Um!...."

Meiling puts the ball down, in front of me, and she directs me to try to kick the ball to make it go between the hedges, over there.

So I try to disregard the conundrum of imparting vertical momentum to the ball, since right now I'm just trying to drive it along a horizontal vector, and that should be easy; I just have to kick it.

So I pull my foot back, and-

"Oof!" Somehow, I'm on the ground. The ball hasn't moved.

Meiling is laughing. It doesn't feel good. Watch says 3:24:02.

"Hey, don't worry about it," Ms. Hong says. "Nobody's good at anything on the first try, right? You wanna try again?"

I, um. I don't really want to.... I don't manage to say it, but maybe it's apparent from my face.

"Not your thing?" Ms. Hong says.

"Um! I- I, um...."

"Hey, don't worry about it. Maybe you're less into, aha, goal-oriented physical activity," she laughs, so I laugh too, even though I don't get it, "And maybe yer more into inward perfection?"

"Um! I-, maybe?"

Meiling waves and starts walking towards a different part of the garden. "You wanna do taiji in the meditation garden? I can rake it, real quick, and it'll help your chakras flow or something."

I follow her, but only physically. "Um, really?"

Meiling shrugs. "I think it's a psychosomatic response, honestly, but either way I feel it's relaxing."

So it turns out, there's this place where there are rocks in the middle of sand, and that you can pull a rake along the sand in order to put designs in it. It's really cool!

And it also turns out, you're supposed to stand on one of the rocks, and then do these fancy poses on it, like standing on one foot or on one hand or stretching your body in different ways, and you hold the pose or something.

"So you're still wearing your maid uniform," Ms. Hong says.

"I, um.... I have multiple uniforms, and I, um. I don't have any other clothes...."
Ms. Hong tilts her head. "No? I'm sure Remi will get you some if you ask her."

"It's- it's fine, really."

"Well, I meant was," Ms. Hong smiles in the hard way, "That you're not exactly wearing workout attire...."

"Um!- Is that bad?"

"I mean, we can do some beginner poses. And like, you won't be standing on your hand anytime soon, haha~"

Ms. Hong is very graceful, and it's clear that she moves very deliberately though the tie-chee poses.

I try to copy her motions, as best I can, and it sort of works.

Trying to bend my legs the way she does for so long is really tiring.

And then Meiling waves her hands and she and she stands up on one foot, and I try it-

"Oof!" Somehow, I'm on the ground. There's a cloud of sand around, though the softness of the sand made the fall not hurt so much.

"Ah- you okay, kiddo?"

But just because the fall didn't hurt so much, doesn't mean there aren't hurt places. I rub my side and my leg. "I don't think I'm cut out for tai chee...."

"Hey, don't worry about it," Ms. Hong says. "Nobody's good at anything on the first try, right? You wanna try again?"

I, um. I really, really don't want to.... I don't manage to say it, but maybe it's apparent from my face.

"Well, maybe my earlier assessemnt was wrong," Ms. Hong says, "Maybe you're not the athletic type?"

"I- maybe..."

Meiling waves and starts walking towards a different part of the garden. "Well, maybe some Xiangqi is more your speed?"

"Um, some what?"

"It's a fast paced, edge-of-your seat game of wits and chance," Meiling says. She waves her hands. "Or, alternatively, a slow, methodical game of strategy."

"Ummm, okay...."
So we go back to the edge of the mansion, where there's some metal tables in a shaded outcropping beset with white and red flowers, overlooking the rest of the garden. It's a pretty cool spot.

Ms. Hong procures a small wooden box, with a board with a grid carved onto it and a collection of wooden disks with, um, with red or black letters on them....

Meiling starts putting the pieces on the board as she explains the rules. "So it's a turn based game, where your goal is to capture the other side's general. You can move one piece per turn and each type of piece can move a different way-"

"Um, so, is it that the only difference in the pieces is what's written on the top?"

Meiling looks over the pieces. "Oh! I mean, that determines which ones are, like, the general or the chariot, but like, I guess this isn't a real fancy set." She smiles. Her teeth are flat. "Sorry, I didn't mean to trick you into learning to read."

"Um, I guess it's okay...."

"Here, you'll start being able to tell the pieces apart from each other soon enough. Anyway, this piece is your general; it can only move within the Palace...."

After Ms. Hong explains the rules and how all the pieces move, we play a game. and partway though, I think I see a path to victory, which is weird, since I just learned the rules like 0:14:32 ago....

And then, now that I look at Meiling's side of the board, I see that she also had a good path to victory....

"Um..." I try to see what kind of expression Ms. Hong is making. "Are- are you going easy on me?"

"Well, it's yer first time. Wouldn't do to just curbstomp ya, now."

"But, um. I think you can win, like, super easily. For like, five moves now."

"Well, that's if you don't take steps to counter the obvious moves."

Meiling smiles. Her teeth are flat. "And hey- You're looking at my moves too- that's the first step to getting good at this game," Meiling closes her eyes and smiles again-

- and then, without opening her eyes, we play three more moves, and on the third, Meiling wins the game, even though I had taken steps to counter the obvious moves, since there was actually a second strategy Meiling was using.
"Oh, wow!"

Meiling folds her arms and opens her left eye. "Impressive, huh? You want me to teach you how to do that?"

"Yeah!"

We do a second game, and I keep an eye out for the strategy Meiling used last game.

I still lose, though.

"You did much better with that game!" Meiling says. It makes me smile, just a little. "So you wanna do another?"

"Umm, maybe once I practice some more...."

"Sure thing," Meiling says, "And if you wanna get better, I know Patchi has - oh."

"Oh, um, what?"

Meiling rubs the back of her head and grimaces with her teeth showing. Her teeth are flat. "Well, it's a book of common early-game and end-game strategies, but like, it's a book, so, you'd have to, ah, read it...."

Hmmmrmph. There it is again, reasons to learn how to read, even though it's gross.

Meiling waves the air. "Hey, don't worry about it so much. You can get better through just trial and error, and I can just teach you, here-" She puts some of the pieces on the board, "This is a generally effective early game strategy set up...."

Eventually, it's time for dinner (It's at 7:00:00, which is 0:05:44 away). Ms. Hong leads the way.

And again, at least for today, Flandre doesn't take dinner with me and Mistress Remilia and Ms. Hong and sometimes Lady Knowledge, so I don't need to run away to avoid learning how to read.

That night, when Mistress Remilia visits my room to ask me about my day, I ask if she can find the book of Zanky moves, to read to me.

"Oh? Did Meiling introduce you to her favorite methodical game of strategy?" Mistress waves the air, "Or, alternatively, 'fast paced, edge-of-your seat game of wits and chance'?

"Um! I- I guess, yeah. Do, um, do you play too?"
Mistress Remilia smiles. Her teeth are pointy. "I have been known to. It's funny, since my specialty is chess, and Patchouli's is shogi, and while there are similarities in the grander strategies between the three, the differences are enough that the three of us are each uniquely bad at the others."

That's, actually, a lot of information to process. I don't say anything.

"Well, I'm not sure how much you'll get out of it, without a board in front of you," Mistress says, "But I'll try my best." She curtsys, "I'll be right back."

So she leaves, real quick, and then comes back, and she turns off all the lights. (Since she can see in the dark, it doesn't hurt her eyes to read without light.)

The strategy book is kind of hard to understand without a board in front of me, and when I'm sleepy, but at least it's in the language I understand. It's pretty nice, overall, to fall asleep to.

_Keeping time, time, time, in a sort of runic rhyme..._

Time is the currency to which one pays for experiencing existence.

That's why they say things like 'spending time together' or 'wasting time doing things' or even 'time is money'.

Because almost everything you do will coincide with a non-zero increase to your experienced time, so, even if you aren't actually exchanging time for other things, doing anything is still coincident with the irreversible passage of time, from your reference frame. And if you consider your time as finite, you can consider the coincident time as 'spent'.

But then, if that's the case, what does that mean for the girl who can stretch time? Am I wealthy, in that I can do all the things without incurring a significant passage of time? Or is the entire notion of 'spending' time wrong, and I could always do as much or as little as I wanted, with the passage of time only a coincidence?

It's a lot to think about, but I figure, I'll have enough time to waste thinking about it, some other time.
Today, after work, I don't wait for Flandre to intercept me; at 2:25:31, I skip over to outside, at the edge of the mansion, where there's some metal tables in a shaded outcropping beset with white and red flowers, overlooking the rest of the garden. It's still a pretty cool spot.

So like, since it's my time off, I can do anything I want, theoretically. I mean, there's a lot I can't actually manage to do, but it's not because I'm not allowed to do them. Like, nothing's stopping me from beating Meiling in a game of Zanky, it's just, I'm not good enough at the game to do it yet.

And even though it's normally be fun to hang out with Flandre, reading's dumb and gross, so I'll just hang out here. I'm not really afraid of Flandre and stupid Koakuma, so I'm just going to hide, just for fun. Sort of like 'hide and seek', except I don't want to get caught, and nobody will eat me if I do get caught.

"Hey Kiddo, I see you're back again," Ms. Hong says.

"Y-yeah. I um. I was wondering if you wanted to play some more of that game..."

Ms. Hong looks over her garden, and at the gardening tools in her hands, and she shrugs and drops them. "Sure. That sounds fun."

Ms. Hong comes back with the game box. Watch says 2:40:17.

"So, um. Do you think you could go all out, this time?"

Meiling looks up. "Are ya sure? I don't wanna to crush your enthusiasm."

"Y-yeah, I'm sure. And don't worry about that; I still think it's cool!"

And I don't know how it happens, but I lose, like, immediately, completely, and utterly.

"Oh. Um. Wow."

Meiling then makes eye contact, and she looks worried. "Ah- you know, I- I shouldn't' have gone that hard- I've been playing for a long time-"

"That was so cool!"

Meiling blinks, and then she smiles. Her teeth are flat. "I- well, I guess that's one way to look at it- did you want to try again?"

This time, I'm determined. "Yeah, and go all out this time too!"
So we start.

So after the game goes on and there's enough possible moves where I need to think, I hit pause on the world.

And I try to plan my moves out, and I try to think of what Meiling would do in response, and then I try to figure out my response to that....

And I hit resume. Since I know I'll need to do it again real soon, I don't worry so much about adjusting my time-rate to the normal setting, just then.

And that game takes a long time, from my perspective, and I kind of push the limits of how long I'm supposed to use pause for a day....

Meiling looks surprised and impressed at a few points, when I make some moves.

But in the end, she still manages to win.

"Wow!" I say, and I mean it. "You're really good at this!" I try to give my best smile to her, since I know how hard it can be to accept a compliment. Even though it doesn't make sense that someone as cool as Ms. Hong would have trouble knowing how cool she actually is.

"Ahaha, thanks~" Meiling says. She rubs the back of her head. "You did really well, there."

Ms. Hong tilts her head to the side and smiles- her teeth are flat. "Didja cheat~"

"I- no~ "

Ms. Hong smirks. "Is that so?"

Even though what I said is true, I feel guilty. Watch says 10:39:06 (wow, I really need to recalibrate it). "I- I- I wanted to do a good job. I didn't cheat, I just, stole some time to think...."

Meiling leans back in her chair. "Yeah, you kind of blurred a little during the match-"

"OH! UMMMM-" Watch says 10:39:09. "I- I'm really sorry- I know that looks wierd-"

"Hey, don't worry about it," Ms. Hong says, " I don't mind. Did you want to play another game?"

"Um," I'm a little tired, and cold, from pressing pause so much. And I need to reset my watch and adjust my time rate. "I mean, I still want to learn, but like, I wouldn't mind doing something different, for- for now..."

Meiling stands up and she does some of her fancy stretches. "Sure thing- I'd been thinking about it a little bit, and I thought, maybe, you might like to learn to cook?"

"Oh. Um, that- that sounds pretty fun, actually!"
Meiling leads me inside. I keep an eye out for Flandre or Koakuma, but Meiling's here, and she said she'd protect me from reading, so it's not all that worrysome....

"So, Meiling, you know how to cook?"

Meiling smirks. "What, you didn't think I did?"

"No! I, um, I mean, it's just, I haven't seen you in the kitchen before..."

"Yeah, I mostly cook for special occasions, nowadays." Meiling says. "So officially, now, I'm the Groundskeeper, but for a brief while I was House Scarlet's only servant. I did cooking and repairs and I served as Remi's runner and bodyguard during her journeys into distant lands."

It's cool to hear those stories, but I was worried; if Meiling's a servant, then should she really be referring to Mistress Remilia in such informal terms?

Then we get to the kitchen. Watch says 5:29:04 (I had reset both my watches when Meiling put away the game pieces).

I usually visited the master kitcehn about every other day, for various tasks, but I'd never cooked here before. There's a wall with stoves, and a big cabinet with cutlery and stuff, and there's a big sealed door to the ice locker where they store fish and game and big cubes of ice.

Since it's the afternoon, some of the maids are preparing supper. A few of them nod in difference to Meiling, when they see her.

But the kitchen's big enough that we have a space to do some cooking, too.

"So most dishes I grew up with involve rice with differently prepared meats," Meiling says. She starts pulling out pots, utensils, and ingredients. "Remilia's partial to things with peanuts, and we have some chicken we need to use up, so we'll make a Gong Bao dish."

"Um- I sort of wondered, do vampires need to eat?"

"They can eat. And like, if they get hurt and need to regenerate, they need to catalyze their protein chains and stuff from something, and Remilia's used to luxury to the point where she'd prefer to use tasty food, rather than raw meat. Hence hiring me as a cook."

"O-okay, that makes sense." I try not to be too focused on 'raw meat'.

And Meilingprocures a big pot, nd she pulls a skinned chicken from the ice locker, and lastly, Meiling pulls out-

A book.

There's words on it.

"I- um...."

"Oh! I, uh, yeah," Meiling rubs the back of her head, "I guess the recipe would be written down, in a cookbook- here, why don't I just try to teach you, verbally?"
"Um...."

So I try to cook the dish without reading the recipe-

And it doesn't go well.

"Ah- hey, don't worry about it," Meiling says, and this time I don't believe her, "Nobody's good at anything on the first try, right? And, you know, we can just mix this into the compost bin."

Hmmmrmph. There it is again, another reason to learn how to read, even though it's gross.

Chapter End Notes

Welp. So much for a return to shorter chapters.

So it was 'Blue Side' because it was Sakuya's point of view, but this was also I think the first chapter that explored Meiling as a character in this steadily-drifting-away-from-canon fic. Like, in the first few installments it was at least plausibly canon compliant, but now it's seeming more and more like a crack fic. Or maybe it was always a crack fic, idk. Maybe I should be worried.

Also, I totally neglected to read Meiling's wiki entry before I started writing her as a collection of Chinese stereotypes, but then it turned out her actual special ability is Tai Chi (which is also known as 'the martial art Waterbending was based on', so if I randomly have her manipulate water, that's the reasoning behind it), so, now, I feel less bad about writing her as a collection of Chinese stereotypes. Apologies if I offend any readers, though.

Also, I did some retonning to standardize Sakuya's points of address; Flandre and Remilia are 'Mistress', since they're the nobles of the house she serves, Meiling is 'Ms. Hong', since she and Sakuya are co-workers and, at least formally, on similar grounds. Patchouli is 'Lady Knowledge' since she's not anywhere in Sakuya's chain of command but is still treated with respect since she's a guest of the manor, and Koakuma is 'stupid Koakuma' because Sakuya disagrees with her about the philosophical nature of math. And if at any point Sakuya doesn't refer to any of them that way it's supposed to suggest character development, but it might also just be me messing up.
Sakuya Learns to Read; Green Side

Chapter Notes

I guarantee no expertise on or even basic, correct knowledge of books, stories, or why we love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koishi had reached her regular end point- where she completed her run-through of interactions with Flandre.

So far, they talked, they laughed, they shared anecdotes demonstrating how their respective sisters were, just, the worst, they did fighting (at the beginning), they did dancing (just a bit), they discussed their favorite foods and Koishi pretended to not have known that Flandre really liked strawberries.

And luckily, Flandre had opted to stay awake all of the previous night, just waffling around hanging out and junk, so Koishi had some more time to build upon their interactions. Except, since usually it didn't get this far, Koishi was a little unsure of what she was supposed to do, now.

Was it bad that Koishi was becoming tired of it all?

It used to be, any of those little moments- dancing, laughing, regaling, griping- if it was with Flandre, someone who really seemed to understand her in so many ways, large and small- being evil, doing murders, having overbearing sisters, enjoying freeform dancing, hating broccoli-

It used to give her so much joy- like a swelling in her heart that made her whole being smile with an energy that escaped as inadvertent laughter.

And she was chasing after that feeling, to try to relive it. To recapture it, somehow.

Except now, whenever she caged that sensation, it never lifted her as much as she remembered, as much as she wanted. It just left her vaguely dissatisfied, disquieted, and disillusioned.

Whenever she recaptured those interactions, it left her emotions feeling hollow, and what once was just so sweet now tasted like ash.

Right now, Flandre was chiefly concerned with trying to convince Sakuya that she should learn to read. Because Flandre herself had her own friends, now.

They were in the library, again. They weren't supposed to be, since Flandre wasn't accompanied by a maid, so they were very visibly sneaking around, loudly whispering, for Koakuma's benefit. And
the fact that they were here to try to find Sakuya a book might have factored in to the librarian's familiar giving them a pass.

And speaking of Sakuya (and now Koakuma, maybe?), Koishi stifled the latent feeling of jealousy bubbling in her gut, that Flandre had other, more tenable friends. But nevermind that now.

"Poetry, poetry...." Flandre mumbled, "I mean, there's gotta be someone who wrote about clocks, right?...."

"Well, what are your favorite stories?" Koishi asked. "I mean, that might be a place to start."

That was something Koishi never really had an interest in asking, before. Like, sure, learning about her crush was cool, but like, they were both preoccupied with their own problems to really get into tales of fictional and/or historical characters.

And also, reading together, silently, next to each other, was a romantic activity for nerds. So she and Flan would never do that.

Flandre paused, and looked up and tapped her chin, and then she turned to the taller girl. "You mean, like, specifically?"

Koishi shrugged. "Specifically, or maybe arch-typically."

Flandre waved the air. "Of course; we are old beings, and the eternal recurrence of stories means that the shapes of stories stay the same even if the details and specifics change with each retelling."

Koishi smiled. "How eloquent."

Flandre coughed and blushed, slightly. "Anyway- I guess - ah, well, first I want to say, I don't read all that much," Flandre said. She pontificated. "I mean, I have a lot of time, when I'm locked in my dungeon, but I usually find other things more compelling. And it's not reading's fault- like, words have the power to destroy and entertain, depending on how they're used, but by nature they are just another way to disseminate information, so, it's a little bewildering that S'kuya seems to hate the idea of such so. Adorable, but bewildering."

After another moment of silence, Flandre clicked the corner of her mouth. "Aaannd, if I had to choose, I'm really partial to, ah," Flandre opened her mouth and exhaled, "Ah, 'troubadour' heroines...."

Koishi tilted her head to the side. "'Troubadour'?"

"I think that's what they're called?" Flandre closed her eyes and waved the air, "You know, like, the youngest daughter who inherited only three coins and a length of rope that stands on end, needs to save her family from an ancient curse from a capricious monster, so she tricks a bunch powerful Youkai with only wit, charm, and lies to facilitate a big climatic trick and break her sister's curse or whatever."

Koishi nodded. She did know that story, or at least some variation of it. Or at least she thought she did.

Flandre waved the air. Her cheeks were tinted, just slightly, and she was talking a little faster. "I mean, it's because I'm too headstrong to do anything like that. I'd just beat my head against the closest thing that looks like it might be an obstacle. And, hey, that usually works, but like, I'm always wondering 'what if it doesn't'?" Flandre pontificated, despondently, "What if you find
problems that you can't, just, punch?"

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side. As someone who had a get-out-of-consequences-free card every time she stepped out of eye-shot, she also worried about losing some of her edge, and that she might be over-relying on a gimmick power.

"Yeah," Koishi said. "I guess that's pretty admirable. Standing from the outside."

Flandre smiled, and tried to pass it off as a smirk, but it reached her eyes, so Koishi knew.

"Anyway," Flandre said. She waved the air. "How about you? What are your favorite stories?"

Koishi paused. She blinked. "Well...."

Another worry about overlying on a gimmick was; how was she ever going to learn to deal with long-term effects of social interaction?

But honesty seemed to work well enough.

One of the benefits of a get-out-of-consequences-free card every time she stepped out of eye-shot, was that Koishi could be as embarrassingly honest as she wanted, and if she got too embarrassed then she could just try again at zero.

"Would you believe," Koishi said, and this time it was her turn to turn away and blush, slightly, "Doomed romance stories?"

Flandre blinked. "Oh?"

Koishi pulled her third eye into her hands. She stroked the stitches, idly. "Like, bittersweet, stolen moments of intimacy that won't last forever."

She didn't provide any examples, but Flandre nodded, as if she understood.

"I mean, sure, yeah," Flandre said, "That's- that's cool. Poetic, in a way."

And there was a moment where they just stood there, next to each other, shooting understanding glances at each other.

"But, in other ways," Flandre said, and one of her fangs glinted in her smirk, "It's also super lame~"

And Koishi pushed Flandre's face.

And then Flandre giggled, and she leaned back and she tried to knock Koishi's hat off her head.

And Koishi deflected those attacks, and then one thing led to another, and then they fought for real. Like, with stabbing each other.

And that was fine. It was how Koishi knew they were friends.

//-----------------------------------------------------------
One night, exactly one night after Flandre last forgot about her, Koishi decided to leave one last parting gift.

Koishi snuck into the Scarlet Devil Mansion, after everything was dark. She used to ponder how easy it was, because she would have thought that some kind of ancient vampire lord might give more stock to basic security issues, but nowadays she just walked in her preferred side door and kept her arm limber in case she had to Ochedin Valannor a random maid awake at witching hour.

Sakuya's room was the third guest room on the right side of the main hallway on the second floor. It wasn't very well furnished, though there was a collection of rocks on the dresser. It was dark, with slight moonlight slivers peaking in through the curtains, and the room smelled like cleaning agent and laundry. And human; since Sakuya was sleeping, fitfully, in the bed, under a thick red blanket, with two stuffed animals under her chin, nestled in her arms.

Koishi crept over, completely silently. She wouldn't go in for the kill just yet.

Koishi flexed her fingers on her right hand and reached out-

And the human opened her eyes, completely, abruptly. Two wide blue irises, stared at her, unblinking.

"Oh! Ummmm...." Sakuya said.

"Hello," Koishi said, and she twirled her outstretched hand back to her sternum and she bowed her head. "I am the boogie-monster. A-boogie-woogie-wooo~~" She waved her arms around.

The maid put her hand to her mouth. Koishi heard a giggle.

"So- ummm," Sakuya said, "What- what are you doing here?"

"Well," Koishi stated. she stood up straight and pontificated, "I represent your deepest fears~ Wooo~"

"No-" Sakuya breathed. She clutched her face. "Not- not reading~"

"Oh, yes," Koishi said, "It is precisely reading."

"Noooo~" said Sakuya.

Koishi channeled energy into her hands. Normally her energy bolts took the form of hearts, but after a bit of practice Koishi was able to find a workaround to get them to take the shape of letters, at least briefly.

"This?" Koishi traced a letter in the dark, leaving a fluorescent green afterglow that persisted for a couple seconds. "This is the letter '∅'."

"Nooooooooo~" Sakuya clutched her face.

"Precisely. And this?" Koishi made another letter in the air, "Is also the letter '∅'."

"Nooooooooooooooooo~" Sakuya flopped back on her bed, over her pillow, with her arms above her, and she rolled twice.
"And when you put it in combinations of other letters, they form words. And words form sentences, which convey information."

"Help! Help!" Sakuya yelled out, "I'm being educated against my will~~~!"

Koishi laughed, and tried to continue her lesson-

But then the door opened, and Koishi turned to see who came to the child's aid-

Except before she managed that, a sharp pain blossomed out of the lower half of Koishi's back and she was flown to the wall, where she hit the window and bounced off.

Koishi blinked and patted the ground around her, until she found her hat and pulled it back on her head.

The Lady of the House- Remilia Scarlet- walked towards her, purposefully, menacingly. Her spear was in her hands and her eyes were glowing red and she stepped, sideways, towards the bed, and its inhabitant.

And she didn't look amused. Not even angry, not really. Just cold, dispassionately furious. "Get away from her," Remilia intoned.

Koishi sighed. "Are we doing this again- oof!"

Koishi's feint was preempted and she took another blow to the torso.

And, Remilia was guarding the door, so Koishi didn't have a corner or ledge or something to turn to let people forget about her.

Koishi shot a blind barrage of green plasma bolts with her left hand and circled around to her right. She parried the next few blows from the vampire lord and landed a scratch during the next melee, though afterwards Remilia used the reach of her weapon to keep Koishi out of range for another rake.

In the next lull period in the fight, Koishi put her hands up and sighed. "I was just teaching her to read-

"Noooo~" Sakuya cried.

Remilia paused, at that. "Wait, really?"

"Really really," Koishi said.

Remilia blinked. And then she lowered her center of gravity into a ready stance.

"Well, you still broke into her room. And the mansion. I guess I'll have to revamp security."

And Remilia lunged. Koishi dodged. She shot a few bolts at the vampire, but she swatted away everything Koishi literally threw at her.

Remilia twirled her spear and faced Koishi again. "And you made her cry. That's unforgivable."

And Koishi sighed, and she braced for Remilia's killing blow-

Except that was also a feint. One of the benefits of a get-out-of-consequences-free card every time she stepped out of eye-shot, was that her opponents always led with their best moves, unaware that..."
Koishi had an inkling of how to counter them. Koishi dodged the magic components and jumped and deflected so that Remilia's attack would send her flying backwards-

And, hey, Sakuya's room had a window, which Koishi had seemed to have forgotten about briefly (Dang, she could just go in that way next time), so Koishi managed to get out of eye-shot anyway-

-Koishi landed in a flower bush, immediately jumped up, ran though her memorized routes through the more static front part of the Mansion's eldritch labyrinthine halls, mentally leaned into the parts of being that made memories of her dissipate faster-

-And she grabbed the doorframe on the third guest room on the right side of the main hallway on the second floor, for leverage, as she jumped in and grabbed Remilia's temple, from behind, with both hands, not even bothering with a coherent incantation and merely pouring energy into the vampire lords subconscious-

"Mistress!-" Sakuya cried out, and she stood up and blurred and suddenly here was a knife in her hand, and a few in Koishi's hat and stomach.

"Hey~ hey~" Koishi soothed, (she dialed it back a bit so her eyes stopped glowing). She spared a hand to wave in front of Sakuya's face, "It's okay~ It's okay~"

Sakuya's crying subsided, just a bit.

"I guess I'm just intruding, here, huh?" Koishi said. She smiled, while saying it, but it hurt to say.

"I- um...." Sakuya said.

Koishi's smile broke into a sigh. "I'll just erase this, and then I'll leave."

"W-wait-"

REMILIA'S ROOM

Remilia looked around the bedroom, ready to come to thr valourous defense of her newest charge, and upon realizing that it was only the human child in the room, she put away her spear and floated over to sit on the bed, offering a hand in comfort to Sakuya.

"Are you okay?" Remilia said. "What's wrong?"

"I- yeah," Sakuya said. She took the hand. "I- I just had a nightmare, I guess...."

"Oh," Remilia said. Then she chuckled, "Well, I'm glad it was nothing."

"I- I guess it was," Sakuya said. Her shivering subsided, slightly. "It was really scary, though."
"Oh?" Remilia said, "What was it?"

"I- um." Sakuya sunk into her shoulders. "I was learning to read, but I didn't want to....."

Remilia blinked, a few times, and she tried to keep both the worry and the amusement from inflecting the vissectudes of her bemused smile. "You don't want to learn to read, Sakuya?"

"OH! UM......."

Chapter End Notes

I worry I might have gotten a little meta here. My bad if it feels artificial. i was reading this 'how to characterize your characters' thing, and it was all, 'what's they're favorite x, and is it congruent with or contrary to what you might expect'. Except I'm not very imaginative so I just made it be thematically meaningful choices. And like, Koishi's a teenager, maturity-wise, so she'd be in her 'sappy love story' phase.
Remilia awoke, with gloom-pleased eyes, embowered from the light. She woke to sleep, and took her waking slow.

Waking was a long process for her; she stretched, and she yawned, and she smacked her lips and blinked several times and she rubbed her eyes until the latent tension of repose was wrung, temporarily, from her immortal coil.

The clock in her room declared that the time was, currently, A Little After Reasonable. Just as she liked it- it was a dream of power, to be important enough for other people to wait for you, and to keep them waiting. It was almost as sweet as having people call upon her, for a social engagement, and to then refuse them.

And speaking of power, it was funny how, even in a world that promised that a monster could do anything she wanted, Remilia still found herself in a diurnal sleep cycle, just to make things easier for all the day-dwellers. That did impact the quality of her sleep, just a little, but the massive goose down mattress and silk pajamas and the small running water fixture in the corner generating white noise still made sleep an immensely enjoyable experience.

Not that vampires really needed to sleep, of course; rest was beneficial but not necessary for her existence. Her brain cleansed its toxins (or whatever the leading experts on the subject determined was the necessity of sleep) automatically and auto-magically and her body didn't need to be in down-time mode to heal itself by, ah, allocating nutrients to her cells (or whatever the leading experts on the subject determined was the utility of healing.) In short, being a monster was very convenient.

No, the reason Remilia slept so much was that, if she was going to wallow in hedonism, a good night's rest was her sin of choice, that soft embalmer of still midnight.

There was no greater pleasure than that of being woken up by an alarm, still groggy with the vernier of slumber, and after fumbling in the dark, disabling that alarm, and returning to sleep. That was the most physically pleasurable sensation she could think of. Never mind the act of feeding, or of sex, or of swimming in money, or whatever it was the leading experts in the subject of sin determined (in the past those were Vampires, but Remilia was willing to let someone else take that
role.) Perhaps she was losing her edge.

But was there anything wrong with that? Some (like, say, her younger sister) might lament a blade lain idle long enough to dull itself, but the idea of an old sword, set to peacefully rust away in calm and quiet was inexorably appealing to the old vampire lord. Lazy days for the remainder of existence- it had its appeal.

And from the looks of it, today was a particularly lazy day. Remilia's waking routine took a little longer than normal. But that just made it sweeter.

And of course, she'd been up late the previous night.

Sakuya had had a nightmare, about learning to read (an adorable and only slightly bewildering nightmare, Remilia determined). And of course, Remilia was there to comfort her.

The vampire lord made a note to have Patchouli inspect the place for evidence of Boogie Monsters or whatever the nightmare-Youkai were called.

But Sakuya was very nervous, about Remilia discovering her fear of learning to read. It was as if Sakuya realized that she should want to learn to read, and she was afraid she was doing something bad, in not wanting to read.

Remilia resolved to have a talk with her, about it, that night. But that was a whole day away.

Getting dressed was also a whole ritual. She'd spent about an hour trying on small parts of her collection of dresses and hats and wing drappings and other accessories. She didn't have a reflection, of course, so she had to try to look at herself the old fashioned way, and that took some time.

Eventually, it was dinner time. Food was, honestly, less of a concern for Remilia. She only needed small amounts of blood as sustenance, so she only valued food based on taste alone. And since hunger was the best spice, it would have to be very delicious food to pique her interest. So Remilia's preferred dining experiences consisted of desserts, often, human meat, whenever they had it, or otherwise very rare steaks, which Remilia did, occasionally, request.

Sakuya tried to look inconspicuous during the entirety of dinner. She kept her head down and tried not to make eye contact with Remilia, Patchouli, or Koakuma (who had decided to join them this evening). It was adorably ineffectual, but Remilia decided to allow it.
And then it was night, again. As usual, Remilia procured an assortment of books from the library she thought Sakuya might enjoy, (though a few days prior Sakuya had actually requested one, for a change, so perhaps she was growing interested in reading). She made her way, leisurely, to the third guest room on the right side of the main hallway on the second floor.

She knocked, twice, before opening the door, and stepping in.

"H-hello, Mistress Remilia," Sakuya said. She was in her pajamas, in bed, hugging both the stuffed animal Remilia had gifted her, and the one Flandre had hoisted on her. Hrm.

"Sakuya," Remilia stated. She pulled the chair out from the desk, and placed it next to the bed, next to where the maid was propped up in bed. Remilia took a seat and held the books in her lap. "How was your day?"

"G-good," Sakuya said.

"Work was fine?"

"Yeah." Sakuya nodded.

"You had fun hanging out with Meiling in the garden, this afternoon?"

"Yeah!" Sakuya smiled.

"That's good," Remilia said. She tried to smile comfortingly. "Anyway, I had hoped we could discuss your lack of interest in learning how to read."

Sakuya tensed up, smushing her toys to her chin. "OH. UMMM......"

"You are, of course, not obligated to learn to read, if you don't want to."

"I- um. Really?" Sakuya looked up.

"Really really," Remilia said. She smiled. "But I do contend that it is a very important skill to learn."

"Um. Yeah....." Sakuya sighed and looked down.

Reading was a skill, yes, but in this day and age it was also a facet of life; there were so many words being bandied about, conveying information both important and banal, short and long, the sheer amount of reading one did, subconsciously, automatically, in order to navigate life, it made learning to read an increasingly necessary requirement to participate in a dominant, homogeneous cultural structure.

Reading was the first step into becoming a part of the dominant society. And reading was the primary method of independent learning- and of writing and of disseminating one's own knowledge. And without either, one would be dependent on the teaching class for all knowledge, and that was its own travesty.

Of course, Remilia was lucky enough to have been born into nobility at a time when teaching aristocratic children to read was normal, as the printing press allowed knowledge to be distrusted at an unprecedented rate. And the fact that most peasants could not read meant that reading was another way to both demonstrate nobility, but also perpetuate it- as knowledge was power, and using the ability to read to acquire power was one way to ensure the divide between nobility and the peasantry.
"Well, you are already a lot older than most beginning readers," Remilia said. It concerned her just a little; true, the earlier one learned to read the more natural it was to do so, but then again, some of the most hardworking peasants learned to read during adulthood, and they continued to read thorough the rest of their short, brutish lives.

"I- um. You think so?"

"I'm actually a little surprised you haven't learned to read already," Remilia said.

"Well, um. I guess there's a reason for that...." Sakuya said.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Um! I- I, um. Not- not really....."

"Then I won't pressure you," Remilia said. "But if there's a personal reason you dislike reading, perhaps I can help you work though it?"

Sakuya was silent, for a while. She hugged her stuffed animals to her chest.

"The reason that I don't want to read," Sakuya said, quietly, to her stuffed animals, "is that, um. I like that you read to me. Especially in- um. In that weird but nice language..."

Remilia blinked. She smiled. "I'm glad you do."

Sakuya looked up, with two wide, cute blue irises. "And I don't- I don't want you to stop."

Remilia chuckled. "Oh? Well, how about I make you a promise," she held her hand out.

Sakuya hesitated a little, before she put her hand in Remilia's.

"I promise," Remilia said, "Whether you end up learning to read, or not, that I'll always read to you, whenever you ask.

Sakuya glanced away and smiled, nervously. She resumed eye contact. "That's- that's really cool. Thank you, Mistress."

Remilia smiled, and she pulled her hand back. She picked up the books she'd selected for the night. "So just out of curiosity, which language was it that you liked?"

"Umm....."

Remilia chose a tome, to open to its third or so page, where the play began. "Did it sound more like, *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas,* she recited, commandingly, her tongue and vocal chords retracing familiar sounds and furies.

"Ummm...." Sakuya emitted.

"Or perhaps," Remilia closed that book and chose another, "It sounded more like, *Le 24 février 1815, la vigie de Notre-Dame de la Garde signala le trois-mâts le Pharaon, venant de Smyrne, Trieste et Naples,* she recited, softly and lyrically, retracing familiar idle memories from a past life.

"Oh, um, the second one?" Sakuya said.

"Of course. Would you like that to be your story, tonight?" Remilia said.
"Y-yeah!"

Remilia cleared her throat and stretched her mouth, and she began to read some more.

"Comme d’habitude, un pilote côtier partit aussitôt du port, rasa le château d’If, et alla aborder le navire entre le cap de Morgion et l’île de Rion...."

And Sakuya sat back in her bed, with a contented smile on her face, as Remilia read her to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I know that while it's implied that Remilia's from some sort of western country (like, that Remilia's a western vampire, rather than a Jiangshi or an Aswang), I think it's more implied that she'd be British rather than French, but I like France, so I figured I'd split the difference and say she's from Bordeaux, which used to be a part of Britian before seceding to France in medieval times.

BTW, References: Remilia was reading 'Metamorphoses' by Ovid, and 'The Count of Monte Cristo', by Alexandre Dumas. Also random bits of old poetry, in her internal monologue.
Chapter Notes

Another Koakuma PoV chapter, since people seem to like those. I'm, running out of old sci-fi to crib from for her, though, haha.

I'm trying to make sure Koakuma's complicated descriptions of simple things are entertaining but don't obfuscate what's actually going on. So like, if Koakuma refers to like an 'arm' instead of a 'goop manipulator' in the middle of an action scene, it's because I was trying to make it somewhat readable.

Also, sometime's I'll forget or not know enough words for Koakuma's vocabulary, but feel free to pretend those were also deliberate attempts to improve quality, rather than mistakes.

I guarantee no expertise in nor basic correct knowledge of, fairy tales, world history, comforting a child, or Touhou lore.

Books.

Piles of books. Inscalable mountains of books, taunting with their musty, dusty smell, their crumpling crinkling as their pages fluttered and danced, and taunting with the sheer, immortal volume, volumes wanting to be read, knowledge wanting to be had, yearning to be held.

But, Koakuma was acutely aware, that this quantity of books was finite. Actually, all quantities of books were finite- such was the nature of books, and of quantities- but there was something different, at least to Koakuma, about the library's quantity of books, in particular.

At her current rate of reading, accounting for the percentages of seconds Koakuma used for doing tasks other than reading, she determined that she could finish reading all of the Scarlet Devil Mansion's books in about 95 million seconds.

But the thing was, sometimes, a New Book appeared, in the library, so, there was hope that, even if Koakuma had to slow her rate of intake, that she would have books to read in perpetuity, but the thought of cutting back to the current rate of intake was disheartening.

But, there were books enough for the Immediate Future- (And it was funny in the ironic sense that Koakuma now had concerns for the now, the future, because she spent so much time with denizens that did), so Koakuma determined that she had other priorities.

"Mistress," Koakuma said, one second, "Where do the books come from?"

"Well, someone makes them; both the pages and bindings, and the contents," Patchouli said, "It is
"Teeheehee," Koakuma said. She surmised that there was a high likelihood that what Patchouli had said was a Joke. "Allow me to rephrase that; where did these books come from?" Koakuma waved her goop manipulators around the library, and all the mountains of books.

Patchouli inhaled, and exhaled, and leaned back in the smooth, continuous piece of furniture she called her 'chair'. This precipitated, if past experiences were to be extrapolated upon, the second where Koakuma should devote all her attention to her mistress, because Patchouli was Full Of Cool Facts, and it was entertaining to be regaled of such.

"Well, a lot of them were Remilia's collection," Patchouli said, "Neither I nor Remilia predate the printing press, but widespread use of mass-publishing wasn't in place for non-religious materials until Remilia was an established noble. As a true patriot, she tried to procure a copy of all stories, memoirs, and poetry written by her country-folk. And there's a few ancient texts too, since she's a bit of a historical afficianado like that."

Patchouli grasped a book with her rightmost manipulator. "But I had a hand in the acquisition of many of them, after I accepted her asylum. Remilia was willing to purchase texts for me, in exchange for my services as a personal mage. Granted, my main concern was procuring texts that would help my magical research- instructional tomes, interviews with various spirits and demons, accounts of visitations to ethereal realms- but at times in my travels I found I could not resist some more frivolous books

This was all very fascinating to Koakuma. "Did you procure much fiction?"

Mistress Patchouli revealed her smile bones. "Ah- this is about young Sakuya's aversion to reading, then?"

Koakuma nodded her cranium. "I admit it had a factor. I had considered the possibility that, if she became interested in reading, it would prompt her to desire to learn how to read independently, as that is much faster and less constrained than having other people read to her. And fiction is the most interesting to read, so I was considering recommending fiction works I myself enjoy, though I figured that someone with more conventional tastes might align better with what a human child would be interested in."

Mistress Patchouli's smile bones were revealed in a slightly different manner. "It's interesting, because the reason for Remilia's first trip to Gensoukyou was driven by the dissemination of Japanese texts into Europe. An embellished autobiography, actually," Patchouli said, "That made her want to actually visit the land it purported to take place in."

Patchouli waved her goop manipulators in the air in small but deliberate gestures. "And that's how she met Meiling, and then me, and then the person who ended up inviting her to this place. So you could say, that books were the reason we're all here today."

Koakuma hadn't known that information until this second, nor the subsequent information Patchouli regaled, regarding her origin story.
Koakuma decided to accompany her Mistress to dinner, again, during the consecutive collection of seconds that mortals referred to as the 'evening'.

In the preceding seconds devoted to ambulating, physically, to the room designated for consuming 'food', in what the smooth, continuous denizens called the 'hallway', Koakuma (And Mistress Patchouli, since thy were Walking Together) encountered Ms. Hong, the gardener, who was Walking Together with Sakuya.

And though Koakuma attempted to appear friendly, when Sakuya noticed Koakuma, the human ran up to behind Meiling and hugged her, around the legs, peaking her head out and looking towards Koakuma with her ocular lids constricted into thin elliptical.

"Meiling's way cooler than you, stupid Koakuma!" Sakuya yelled, unprovoked.

Koakuma processed that information. "I suppose that statement may be accurate-"

"She's taller and stronger and just better than you! Nyeh~"

Koakuma processed that information as well. "Those first two are quantify-ably true, but 'better' is a subjective

"And I like her way more! Nyeh~"

Meiling closed her oculars and brought her goop manipulator behind her cranium. "Aha~"

"Looks like you've made a friend, Meiling," Mistress Patchouli said.

Meiling revealed her smile bones, "Looks like I did." She then bumped Sakuya's cranium, twice, with her rightmost goop manipulator.

"And," Patchouli said. She turned to face Koakuma, "It looks like you've made an enemy, Koakuma,"

"I am uncertain as to the exact chain of events that lead to the circumstance, but," Koakuma said, "looks like I did."

Meiling laughed, at that. Her kind of laugh was an onomatopoeia that was more of a 'ha-ha-ha' than a 'teeheehee', like Koakuma had originally internalized.

"And this is all because little 'kuya doesn't want to read?" Meiling said.

"Yes," Koakuma said, "She does not fully understand the importance of the ability to read."

"Noooo~" said Sakuya.

"Reading will help you learn, and it can take you on an imagination adventure," Koakuma explained, again.

"Noooooo~" Sakuya clutched her face.

"I am perplexed that you do not desire, not merely knowledge, but the ability to attain knowledge. And furthermore, does not the prospect of embarking upon an imagination adventure entice you?"
"Noooooooooooooooo~" Sakuya flopped on the ground with her arms out, on the other side of Meiling, and she rolled twice. "And besides, the glorification of the attainment of knowledge is just hubris and pride - it is a flamboyant expenditure of resources upon something not essential, for the purpose of flaunting one's commitment to excess."

"Ah-", Koakuma said, as she devoted processing power to come up with a rebuttal.

"Ha-ha-ha," Meiling laughed. She patted her goop manipulator at the apex of Sakuya's cranium. "You've been hanging out with Flan, huh?"

Koakuma did not think of anything to say at that juncture that would help the situation, so she opted to talk to her Mistress for the rest of the consecutive series of seconds known as 'dinner'.

However, it appeared that Sakuya took the subsequent consecutive seconds of silence as an admission of defeat, but that seemed to improve the human's mood, so perhaps the net effect was positive.

One second during the consecutive collection of seconds that mortals referred to as the 'evening'-though this was different from the 'dinner' portions of evening- it was much later, during a collection of consecutive seconds that most denizens of the smooth continuous world (including Koakuma) began their somnolent rituals- Koakuma secured permission from the Lady Scarlet to perform one aspect of such ritual.

Koakuma made her way to the ingression point of the smooth, continuous area defined as Sakuya's 'room' and she beat her rightmost goop manipulator against the wooden barrier. Upon reviving verbal permission to enter, Koakuma did so.

Sakuya looked at her, with an Expression. "W-what are you doing here, stupid Koakuma?" Sakuya said.

"I have a surprise, for you," Koakuma said, She revealed a book, and she opened the book to a page she had marked, in previous seconds.

"U-um...."

"I stumbled upon the poem from which is the couplet you keep reciting under your breath," Koakuma said.

"OH. UM...." Sakuya's face shifted redward when Koakuma said that last bit.

"Allow me to recite it to you, as part of your pre-somnolence ritual," Koakuma said.

"Um!" Sakuya said. Koakuma paused, but the human said nothing further, which Koakuma interpreted as a confirmation.
And once Koakuma finished reciting the poem, Sakuya looked completely scandalized. Her face had redshifted significantly and her goop manipulators were shaking.

"S-so," Sakuya said, weakly, and quietly, "it-it wasn't about clocks?"

Koakuma paused. "It- ah= very clearly did not intend clocks to be it's subject matter. Did, you, not know know entire poem before?"

Sakuya immediately broke out of her catatonia, and became angry. "I HATE YOU!"

"That is a little extreme-"

Sakuya threw her pillow at Koakuma's face. It impacted with a soft 'wumph'.

"YOU RUINED MY POEM!" Sakuya yelled.

Koakuma tried to reveal her smile bones in a reassuring manner. "Well, it wasn't your poem- the essence of the poem is untouched by any invocations of it-"

"Poems aren't platonic entities!" Sakuya yelled, "It- it was my thing, and- and you made it about bells!"

"But it was always about bells, you just were not aware of the subject matter."

And Sakuya's anger faded, a modicum. She oscillated her olfactory organ.

"Yeah," she sighed, "But- because I- I, didn't know, I guess- that meant that, to me, it wasn't. And that's why it was special...." Sakuya's olfactory organ oscillated again.

Koakuma froze. That was a lot of information to process.

And for the first time, Koakuma seriously considered a particular viewpoint- that the substance of information might be inflected by its source and the circumstances it had acquired, and that to the puny mortals, that information might not shake the infecting tendrils of subjective inflection-

Koakuma opened her buccal cavity, in preparation of some kind of statement following the completion of her processing said information-

but she was preempted by Sakuya, who had launched a smooth, continuous Pillow into the collection of goop known as Koakuma's Face.

"You're dumb and your face is dumb and I hate you!" Sakuya yelled, "Get out! Get out get out!"

And with only a little stumbling, Koakuma vacated the room.
During the immediately proceeding consecutive collection of seconds known as the 'day', Koakuma encountered Sakuya a non-zero amount of times, and they were always extremely unpleasant affairs involving a lot of Sakuya yelling, and of throwing things with non-zero magnitude towards Koakuma.

And since this situation was undesirable, Koakuma decided to take steps to ameliorate it.

So she formulated a Plan, and with the blessings of her Mistress, and after some words of encouragement that were themselves subsequent to few laughs from Flandre that were

Koakuma went out into the garden, with a set of tools she had picked out for that occasion. She encountered Sakuya and Meiling, inclined, sedentarily, upon the smooth continuous pieces of furnitures called 'chairs'.

"Aahhhhhhhhh!" Sakuya yelled. She wobbled her goop manipulators above the rest of her body with vectors defined by nondeterministic dynamical parameters, and she stumbled out of her chair and ambulated behind Miss Hong, hiding behind her.

"Meiling, save me!" Sakuya called out

Meiling laughed. Then she stood up, and lowered her center of gravity and brought her arms into a stance that would allow her to quickly deliver strikes. "Well, you heard the lady." She flexed her goop appendages, and brought them both in front of her.

Koakuma paused most of her other processes to process that information. "I don't want to fight you," she said.

"Well, I don't wanna either," Meiling said. She gestured in the direction of Sakuya, "But, I gotta save her. You know how it is-"

And then Koakuma paused the processing of *that* information, since she detected Meiling rightmost good manipulator rapidly approaching her Face, so Koakuma directed motion into her body, to dodge.

Koakuma dodged three more strikes during a retreat. Koakuma prepared a binding spell in her rightmost goop manipulator, and since her opponent's attack pattern had progress long enough to be predictable, Koakuma brought her rightmost goop manipulator tangent to Meiling's outstretched fist at the zenith of the gardener's strike, to trigger the spell. Umbral chains materialized around Meiling's fist, confining them along all spacial axis.

Meiling smirked, and proceeded forward with the whole of her body while bringing her leftmost ambulatory appendage into Koakuma's torso. Koakuma relinquished manual control of all her muscles besides those in her arms, which she brought over Meiling's leg for long enough to weave
another binding spell.

And with two limbs confined in midair, Meiling was immobilized, and posed awkwardly. Koakuma resumed active control over her muscles to lift herself off the floor.

Koakuma felt the urge to adjust parts of her wardrobe back into symmetrical positions, so she did. "This was unnecessary and counterproductive."

But, it turned out, Meiling was also magic (or at least, able to tap into some kind of supernatural energy), since she escaped from the bindings in an explosion of particles, emitting light from all ends of the visible light spectrum. The lights slowed and then hung in the air for a few seconds, before coalescing around Meiling's fist, which was in that second, rapidly approaching the origin of Koakuma's visual sight.

Koakuma's pain receptors rang alarms, almost crowding out the sensors that told her that her body had impacted the mansion's outer wall and was now collapsed in a field of rubble. Koakuma manually disengaged all unnecessary processes as she stood up, and began to Fight For Real.

“Good fight, Kuki,” said Meiling, panting heavily and bleeding from the side of her head.

“I. Ah. I guess that is- <cough>,” sighed Koakuma from where she sat atop the martial art Yokai stomach. Her left goop manipulator was limp and she had a large burned gash along her torso. "not an immediately disprovable statement."

“You want to call it a draw?” Meiling said,

“What?” wheezed Koakuma, “No way. It is a provable statement, however, that I won this altercation. 'fo' sho'."

Meiling pushed the smaller girl off of her, so that they lay parallel to each other.

"You've got a real good 'drunken master' style going for you," Meiling said,

"I-" Koakuma processed that information, "thank you for the implicit compliment, thought it wasn't in any way deliberate." Koakuma paused for a few seconds, to ping the progress of regeneration in her left goop manipulator. "What,

"Oh, that's just Tai Chi," Meiling said. "If you do it long enough, you learn to do that.

Kokakuma processed that information. "Really?"

"Yeah," Meiling said. She coughed, and some red liquid meat dripped out of her buccal cavity. "And also how to manipulate water. But anyway-" Meiling stood up, and moved all her appendages, experimentally, "As you have defeated me, you have gained the right to talk to lil' Sakuya."
"But, Meiling~" Sakuya whined, as Meiling walked away.

Koakuma had managed to reorient herself to vertical by this second, so she turned to the cart she had enchanted to follow her (but only for the duration spanning a small amount of seconds).

"I actually came here to apologize," Koakuma said, "And to thank you for helping come to understand your worldview a little more.

Sakuya paused.

"I had discussed it with my Mistress, and I have come to understand your subjective interpretation of information. And I would like to apologize for any distress caused by an in congruence in our worldviews, and I, 'would like to make it up to you'," Koakuma said. Those last words in that order were something Patchouli told her to say, since they apparently conveyed the feeling that Koakuma was trying to convey, even there was nothing to make and making things in a particular direction seemed arbitrary.

Sakuya folded her goop manipulators and pouted. "Well. That's, good, I guess. You're still dumb, though. And I hate you."

"I- will not argue with that," Koakuma said. It was true, for this moment, though she did intend to change Sakuya's mind of the matter at some second.

"Sakuya," Koakuma said, "Would you like some tea?"

Sakuya made an expression with her facial muscles, and one or more seconds afterwards, she nodded.

So Koakuma began performing the ancient and esoteric Ritual To Beget Tea -

"You're doing it wrong, stupid," Sakuya said. She had ambulated behind Koakuma, in previous seconds.

Koakuma personally felt that that statement was not accurate, but she didn't argue. Instead Koakuma relinquished primacy at the tea stand, and Sakuya started performing the Ritual to Beget Tea.

And when she was done, Sakuya ambulated towards Koakuma, and the human puffed out her cheek and didn't make eye contact, when she presented Koakuma a tea cup.

Koakuma closed her oculars (as she had discerned that the smooth, continuous denizens found that they appeared unnerving when she blocked their signals and let them go limp- and also because it turned out the smooth, continuous mortals acted the same way, when trying to emulate what Koakuma was able to do effortlessly) and she more actively pinged her taste and olfactory senses, subsequent to which, she consumed the tea.

"This is really good," Koakuma said.

"Y-yeah. Because I made it," Sakuya said, with a tone of something approaching indignation and
"Indeed," Koakuma said. "So, I had wanted to ask you something, and I would appreciate it if you answered honestly. Because I thought we had established enough rapport that we can be honest with each other."

Koakuma paused, for one or more seconds, before she continued, "And also because, even though your mathematical framework is based almost entirely on incorrect assumptions, the fact that you are willing to base your worldviews on math suggests that you are capable of great intelligence, which I personally admire, and, said worldview suggests a kinship between us."

Sakuya's mouth changed shape. "Um. What?"

"You had hoped correctly, Sakuya: I, do think that you are special. I would like to be your friend."

Sakuya looked down. "O-okay. Um, you- you can ask, your question...."

Koakuma inclined her cranium, as was custom, and then she spoke. "Why were you attempting to sow conflict between me and Ms. Hong,?"

Sakuya looked down.

"Um...... Couldn't- couldn't you just ask me why I don't want to learn to read, instead?"

Koakuma processed that information.

"Oh. Is that less personal? I would have thought that your deep seated vehemence against reading was more personal, and thus something you would be less willing to share, than as to why you "

"Well. Um. It- it was dumb, yeah...." Sakuya said, "But I, kind of wanted you to fight over me...."

Koakuma processed that information. "What purpose would that serve?"

"I- I don't know," Sakuya said. She continued staring at the ground. She offered no more information.

"Well, if you enjoy Ms. Hong's company for certain reasons that do not overlap with the same reason you enjoy my company, then I have no objection." Koakuma said, "And if those certain reasons do overlap, then perhaps I can see the potential for objection, given that I would like to be your friend, and friends enjoy spending time with each other, but I would not go out of my way to fight Ms. Hong, and I cannot begrudge you if you personally find her to be better company than myself."

Sakuya inclined her cranium, a modicum.

Koakuma mirrored the motion."Thus, there is no reason to insist we fight each other: you are always free to chose who you wish to spend your time with."

After one or more seconds, Sakuya said, at a low decibel, "Okay."

"Well, then," Koakuma said, "Since you earlier suggested that that information was harder to share than the reason for your objection to reading-" 

Koakuma tilted her body forward, "It follows that you should be fine with telling me, why you don't want to read."
"Um....." Sakuya said, "I, guess that makes sense....>"

"It is fine if there are books you do not wish to read." Koakuma said, "But it is always your choice which books to read. Which would suggest that you do not have any books that you wish to even have the possibility of reading. Many books are fiction, and fun. Does not the prospect of an imagination adventure entice you?"

"No!" Sakuya said, at a higher decibel than when she emitted noise in previous seconds. "Stories are dumb!"

"And- what information lead you to that particular conclusion?" Koakuma said.

"Because something terrible always happens to the humans in stories," Sakuya said.

"Is, that true, in your experience?" Koakuma said, though subsequently she wondered if her question was necessary.

"Like- um," Sakuya applied pressure to the outside of her buccal limits. "The, first bedtime story I was ever read, was about this lonely fishmonger, who one day, went to the sea to, kill herself, but then a mermaid found her, and offered to be her bride for a year, and the fishmonger could dismiss her at any time but if they were still together at the end of the year, the Mermaid would eat her heart. And after a year of bliss, it came time to end the relationship." Sakuya gesticulated with her goop manipulators, "and the human realized that returning to a lonely life would just be that much more unbearable, since she had tasted happiness, so she threw herself into the ocean so the mermaid could eat her heart."

Koakuma refrained from saying that that story sounded like a perfect example of an ideal Faustian bargain with no deception from either party.

"So that's why I like it when Mistress Remilia reads to me in a language I don't understand," Sakuya said, "So that way, I don't have to know if what's going on is bad for the humans in the story or not."

"But being recited in a different language doesn't make those stories less likely to still be about terrible fates befalling errant humans," Koakuma said.

"Yeah, but, it doesn't to me, when I listen to them," Sakuya said. "Like, all those stories are about, like, a lonely human who meets a beautiful fox youkai in the forest, but then at the end the kitsune eats her. Or an impoverished human wanders into a dragon's den to try to find wealth, and the dragon captures her and lets her play with the gold for a few weeks before getting hungry and eating her. Or, like, the human makes a deal with a Shinigami to avoid death, but then dies anyway because of a loophole."

Ah. Loopholes. Many stories Koakuma had stumbled upon contained them. She had thought they were cautionary tales for those who would attempt to make deals, and perhaps that was the case for mortals as well.

"It's interesting to me that you think that," Koakuma said, "Because, many of the cautionary tales in my culture, involve humans using loopholes to dupe innocent, hardworking demons. Perhaps those might interest you?"

"No." Sakuya said. She folded her goop manipulators, "I don't want to hear them, because then the humans are the bad guys," Sakuya said.
"Well, then- hmmm," Koakuma said. "Perhaps I will, attempt to think of alternatives, in the proceeding seconds...."

Sakuya said nothing.

"So, is this a secret?" Koishi asked, "Do you not want me to share with other members of the mansion the reason you object to learning how to read?"

"I- ummm," Sakuya said, "Maybe, if anyone asks, you can tell them, to just ask me, and, I'll tell them....."

"I will do that, then," Koakuma said, "Thank you for sharing this with me."

"Well. Okay, I guess...."

Koakuma stood up, "In that case, I will take my leave of you, now-"

"Um! Koakuama...." Sakuya said, from her 'chair'.

Koakuma paused. "Yes?"

"Do. Um. Do you know how to play Zanky?"

Koakuma processed that information. "Oh, Xianqi? You wish to play a session with me?"

Sakuya looked down. "Um. If- if you want...."

"This is agreeable. You will need to remind me of the rules, however."

"AHHAHAHA~" cackled Sakuya, at the endpoint of their game, "I beat you~ I beat you~"

Koakuma nodded, "That is an accurate statement."

Sakuya's enthusiasm decreased a few degrees before resolving to previous levels. She waved her goop manipulators, cyclically, in accusatory motions. "I beat you~~~"

And since that seemed to improve the human's mood, so the net effect was positive.
And later that night, as Koakuma read some books, hoping to acquire enough new information to formulate a solution to at least one of her unsolved problems,

After the insight brought to her by her smallest friend, Koakuma had now discovered why she was uneased by the knowledge that the library’s quantity of books was finite, where any other finite quantity of books would not evoke the same, lingering disquiet.

Because, Sakuya was right: that the substance of information might be inflected by its source and the circumstances it had acquired, and that to a thinking being, that information might not shake the infecting tendrils of subjective inflection. Because, this was her library, and her books were running out....

And at some second, Koakuma realized that there was an Obvious Solution, now that she had stumbled upon it, from a new angle. (Teeheehee, ‘angles’), to that lingering, haunting disquiet, and to the problem that her friend known as ‘Sakuya’ detested reading.....
Sakuya Learns to Read; Blue Side Redux, so like, this arc is a cube, since there's six sides

Chapter Summary

The end of this arc.
Spoilers: Sakuya Doesn't learn to read by the end :P

Chapter Notes

EDIT: So, I accidentally hit 'post' instead of 'save' before this update was actually finished, so, you may have seen an incomplete version. My bad. Should be fixed now

Technically, genetic theory was invented before Gensoukyou got sealed away, so it's conceivable that Remilia knows what it is and believes in it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keeping time, time, time, in a sort of runic rhyme

Time, as in like, 'lunchtime' or 'funtime'- different times of the day designated primarily for the purpose of a specific thingy- isn't real. Its just, a made up thing that works since everybody agrees to it. Like, if somebody doesn't even take a lunch break (like me), then, say, things like, agreeing to meet at 'lunch time' won't work. Except, I do know what time lunch time takes place, so, maybe, that's not the best example...

But anyway- even though Times, aren't real, sometimes the mental association of a period of time for a certain task does make that time, better for doing some things, during that time. So in that way, having a 'dinner time' or a 'work time', has empirically measurable effects.

Like, for example, right now, it's bed time.

And I feel sleepy, since one of the empirically measurable effects of 'bedtime' is that I mentally associate it with sleepyness, so I get sleepy. But one thing is, that 'bedtime' is subdivided into different, smaller Times- like, bathing, and changing into pajamas, and then brushing my teeth and then my favorite part of bedtime, which is when Mistress Remilia comes in to read to me, until I fall asleep.

By definition I cannot check when I exactly I fall asleep, but I have a good sense of when it is. Like, when I last check the clock- which is hard since it's always dark- it's usually about 9:14:~~, and it usually takes about fifteen minutes of listening to Mistress read to me before I don't remember being awake anymore.
So I sit in bed, and i wait for a knock at the door, for Mistress Remilia to come in and read to me. And pretty much on time, there comes a knock at the door, and since it's statistically likely to be Mistress Remilia, I bid the knocker to come in, and Reading Time officially starts. Watch says 8:40:42.

"Hello, Sakuya," Mistress says. She smiles. Her teeth are pointy.

"H-hello, Mistress!"

"So, I hear that your feud with one of the other residents of the manor has escalated."

"OH. UM....." Watch says 8:40:51.

"I am very happy that you're getting along with the rest of us," Mistress says. "I consider Meiling and Patchouli family, and even though both you and Koakuma are relative newcomers, it is my hope that you both find a home here."

"Oh! Okay. Ummm- " I'm not sure if I should say this next part, but I do- "You, um, didn't mention, um...Flandre....?"

Mistress makes an adult expression. "Well, she is... family by blood. Literally blood, if not genetics, aha," Mistress laughs. I'm not sure if I should laugh too.

Mistress waves the air. "But, she is a burden I must bear, so, there is no sense in complaints or laments."

"Oh! Ummm, is, she a burden, to you....?"

"Well, I am directly responsible for her existence, and thus for all of her sins," Mistress says, "But if you are asking if she is exasperating, the answer is yes, often, though it comes and goes."

"O-oh, okay."

Mistress smiles. Her teeth are pointy. "And lately, it seems you have been a decent influence on her, so allow me to express my gratitude."


And then she reads a nice story in one of the fancy languages I don't understand, until I snuggle up into the covers and fall asleep, at a time which I'm not entirely sure of, but which I guess is about 9:14 and a bit.

*Keeping time, time time, in a sort of runic rhyme.*
You know, just to spite stupid Koakuma, I'm just going to pretend that that couplet is still about clocks.

And it's fun to sing, anyway.

Like, that story I heard about the assassin who always sings the nursery rhyme her dead kids liked, before she hunted down their killers (and then ultimately died, because stories always end with the humans having bad things happen to them.) Like, technically, that song was about dying of diseases, but in that context it was, a metaphor for childhood happiness.

So I sit in bed, waiting for a knock at the door, for Mistress Remilia to come in and read to me. And pretty much on time, there comes a knock at the door, and since it's statistically likely to be Mistress Remilia, I bid the knocker to come in, and Reading Time officially starts. Watch says 8:38:24.

"Hello," Mistress says. She smiles. Her teeth are pointy. "So, another member of the House has volunteered to read to you, tonight. Is that okay with you?"

Well, there'll be more more Bedtimes, and thus more times for Mistress Remilia to read to me, especially if I never learn to read, so I guess it's okay.

"Y-yeah...."

Mistress smiles. Her teeth are pointy. Then she bids someone come in from the hallway.

But then a stupid head pokes into the doorway to my room.

"Oh nooo-"

"Just give this story another chance," Koakuma says, "Perhaps, hearing it again, you will re-"
contextualize it, after experiencing it in different context?"

That sounded dumb, but, I guess I only partially remember this story, from when I was little, Or, little-er. "Okay, fine."

"Anyway," Koakuma clears her throat, "And so one day she went to the shore of the sea and lamented her loneliness, and to her surprise, her pleas were answered. A beautiful mermaid looked out of the water, and she spoke."

Koakuma speaks in a tone that seems kind of like Lady Knowledge's default speaking patterns, for the next part.

"I offer you a deal, dear human. I will be your bride, and you may dismiss me at any time, but in one year, if we are still together, I will eat your heart."

"And the spinster considered this deal. Desperate for companionship, she resolved to seek only a taste of the life she longed for, before dismissing the creature and preserving her heart, and her life."

"So she accepted the mermaid's bargain."

"And so the old fishmonger in this village by the sea began her new life, with her new bride.

"The mermaid was true to her word: Every morning she would accompany the fishmonger at the pier, helping catch fish."

You know, most fish practice cannibalism, since their reproductive strategy involves making loooots of babies, each with an individually low chance of long-term survival, which means that statistically a nonzero amount of offspring survive long enough to grow up and repeat the cycle.

"And every afternoon, the mermaid would accompany her new partner to the market. And every evening, she would cook her new partner dinner, and they would dine together. And every night she’d taste the salt from her skin, and lay together through the night."

"I always wondered what that was about." Like, fish live in the ocean, and the ocean has salt in it, so maybe they like salt for like hydrostasis or something when they live on land, which usually has less salt in it. I relay this theory to Koakuma.

"You know, I'm not sure myself, but your theory does make sense," Koakuma says, "Personally, I entertained the idea that residence in proximity to the ocean leads to a buildup of salt from ocean on your epidermis, and that merfolk culture ascribes some significance to salt as a result."

"Hmm, that theory also makes sense."

"Anyway," Koakuma clears her throat, "And at first, the fishmonger resolved to only allow herself a taste of companionship and the happiness that long eluded her. But by the end of every day, she found that she longed for another taste of, until she found she could not bear the thought of living without her bride."

"And after a year had passed, and the woman approached the shore where she had first made her deal. She looked back on her life, and her newfound happiness, and she looked forward to what awaited her if she returned to loneliness, and she made her decision."
"One year from their first meeting, the old fishmonger confronted the mermaid. 'I thank you for the life you have given me, my love,' said the woman, 'and I accept the renumeration, for my life is not worth living, if I am to return to living alone.'

"And the mermaid, somemly and sadly, mbraced her lover one last time-"

And this was the part that just made the whole story sad, since it was about the ephemerality of happiness and the futility of pursuing it-

"And dragged her under the depths. But as the merfolk osculated her mouth against relevant organs, the human found that her respiration became functional, and her epidermis became scaled and slick like that of a merfolk."

Hmmm.

"'I have consumed your heart,' said the merfolk, 'as evidenced by your repeated decision to continue the bargain up to the point of your impending demise. As thus, my half of the deal is fulfilled'."

Hmmmmmmmmmm.

"And the former-human met the merfolk's extended family and engaged in other domestic cultural rituals in preparation of progressing a family unit."

"And they lived with maximum utility as the limit of time approached infinity. The End." Koakuma closed the storybook dramatically.

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

I smush my mouth. "That's, a little different than how I remember it being."

Koakuma smiles. Her teeth are flat. "Maybe it's a different version of it. One that ends well for its human character."

"Mmmmm, maybe...."

"You found it insufficiently happy for the human protagonist?"

"Well, since she became a mermaid in the end, it's not a story that's happy for a human."

"But," Koakuma moves her face, "she got to live an enjoyable life with companionship."

"Yeah, but it's all because she turned into a monster at the end. That's just another way of saying humans don't get happy endings, since they have to become inhuman before they do."

Koakuma doesn't say anything for a bit. But then she sighs. "Then, I apologize for the sub-optimal story."

And she tucks the book under her arm and starts walking out the door.

"Oh, Koakuma, wait!"

Koakuma stops at the doorway.

I snuggle up into the covers and hug my dollys. "Thank you. For the story."
Koakuma smiles. Her teeth are flat. "Of course."

"Um- Maybe, we could do this another time. Once you get better at coming up with stories."

Koakuma smushes her mouth. "I will consider it. Good night, Sakuya."

I close my eyes. "Good night, Koakuma."

And then she shuts the door, and then I fall asleep, at a time which I'm not entirely sure of, but which I guess is about 9:12 and a bit.

OMAKE:

"Heyo, kiddo," says Meiling. "Today, Im gonna read to ya something I liked, that i think you might like too. And since you like listening to foreign languages, I'll read it to you in my native tongue."

"O-okay!"

Meiling clears her throat,

"蓋聞天地之數，有十二萬九千六百歲為一元。將一元分為十二..."

OMAKE 2:

"IT'S READING TO SAKUYA TIME!" Flandre yelled. The door flew open, 'cause she kicked it open.

"So, I know you don't like to read, so I got you a picture book! It's one of my favorites."

Flandre sat next to me, so I could also look to the side of her and see some of the pictures. They were, kind of hard to look at, though. Then she cleared her throat, and spoke in a gruff voice.

"On Friday night, a comedian died in New York. Somebody knows why. Down there, somebody..."
OMAKE 3:

Lady Knowledge takes her time approaching the bedside. She always wears her pajamas, so I guess she's always ready for bedtime thingys.

"Allow me to read to you from a book that gave me great comfort, when I was younger," she says.

That sounded cool. "O-okay!"

She clears her throat, and recites, in a whimsical voice:

"The last unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and it lived all alone. Because all other unicorns had disappeared...."

OMAKE 4:

"Oh! Um... who a-

"Yeah things will go a lot faster if you just pretend we've already met," Koishi says.

"Umm...."

"So here goes," Koishi cleared her throat, and spoke in an empyrial tone of voice.

"Ai! laurië lantar lassi sûrinen,
yéni únótimë ve rámar aldaron!
Yéni ve lintë yuldar avánier
mi oromardi lissë-miruvórevas...."
Reference guide:
I stole most of that fairy tale from something I once saw on Tumblr but which I cannot find again. Apologies to the original creator of that story.
In the Omake's, Meiling's was 'Journey to the West', since it's Chinese, Flandre's was 'Watchmen', because I figured it'd be funny, Patchouli's was , and Koishi's was Galadriel's lament, since it's in elvish. I didn't try to put any additional meaning into any of their reading choices.
Remilla awoke, blinking the residue of secret joys and secret smiles and little pretty infant wiles sorrows from her timorous eyelashes. The clock pronounced it A Little After Reasonable.

Waking was a long process for her; she stretched, and she yawned, and she smacked her lips and blinked several times and she rubbed her eyes until the dormant gleanings of sepulchral beguilement fled from her impervious soul.

She stretches, and yawned, otherwise moved her body in ways that were slightly uncomfortable, but in a good way; in the little aches that reminded you, that you could feel; the good, and the bad.

And her retirement of wallowing in hedonistic luxury seemed more like 'Odin sleeping in for years' than 'Bacchus as the world burns down', but that needn't make her weep. In many way, calm contentment was preferable to rapacious glee.

The mansion's master bedroom was stocked with a collection of complementary commodities to her sin of choice. Decorative blankets. Fancy canopy drapings. Comfy pillows. Particularly luxurious stuffed animals- the kind for aesthetic purposes, since the variant of stuffed animal that, say, you, as a child, would tuck under your chin as you fell asleep, - was for children, and Remilia had since outgrown such idle fancies.

Forget lust, or avarice, or even wroth (though speaking of which, early on in her retirement she would occasionally go on a massacre spree in the nearby town, but that never seemed to appeal to her viscerally, sinfully, fulfilling. And the subconscious knowledge that Flandre enjoyed such trite and base indolence played a part in quelling the satisfaction from such outings), it was Sloth that was the most succulent of sins.

And sloth was all the more sinful because, as a quirk of her vampiric mythobiology, Remilia didn't require sleep. This whole ordeal was an ostentatious extravagance of the highest wastefulness, in a similar way to demanding your blood tributes receive higher education, or your toilet's carved from marble and embossed with gold.
But eventually, Remilia finished waking up, getting dressed, and musing on the nature of sin, and she started her day.

And then it was night, again. Sakuya had taken an interest in Fairy Tales (which, aha, were just regular tales here in Gensoukyou, as it were), as a result of recent events regarding the librarian's familiar, so Remilia procured an assortment of intricately illustrated books about simple moralistic plots involving archtypical characters and fantastical settings. She made her way, leisurely, to the third guest room on the right side of the main hallway on the second floor.

Remilia knocked, twice, before opening the door, and stepping in.

"H-hello, Mistress Remilia," Sakuya said. She was in her pajamas, in bed, hugging under her chin both the stuffed animal that Remilia had gifted her, and the one Flandre had hoisted on her. Hrm.

"Sakuya," Remilia stated. She pulled the chair out from the desk, and placed it next to the bed, next to where the maid was propped up in bed. Remilia took a seat and held the books still in her lap. "How was your day?"

"G-good," Sakuya said.

"Work was fine?"

"Yeah." Sakuya nodded.

"And your first lesson with Koakuma went well?"

"Um- yeah! She, mostly talked about the history of the alphabet. Did you know it was invented only twice in history?"

Remilia inclined her head. "I did indeed. Isn't learning fun?"

"Yeah!" Sakuya smiled.

"That's good," Remilia said. She tried to smile comfortingly. "Anyway,- I hear from some of the staff," she said, "That you have taken an interesting in cooking."

Sakuya tensed up, smushing her toys to her chin. "OH. UMMM......."

"Was there some reason to be embarrassed by it?" Remilia said.

Sakuya looked at her stuffed animals, "iz i mean, its just, that, i'm really bad at it...."
Remilia chuckled. "Is that all? You know, the first step to being good at something, is to be bad at it."

"Oh! Okay, yeah, that makes sense," Sakuya said.

"Well, if the impetus for your embarrassment is your, novice's shortcoming," Remilia said, "Would you allow me to help you overcome that hurdle?"

Sakuya blinked. "Um!... O- okay..."

And later that night, with something to look forward to the next day, Remilia let the peaceful repose of unnecessary sleep amid outrageous luxury overtake her.

And the next morning, earlier then usual, Remilia awoke, blinking the residue of infant joys and infant smiles and pretty, oblique, formless guile from the tips of her eyelashes.

Waking was a long process for her; she squirmed, and she growled, and she smacked her lips and blinked several times and she rubbed her eyes until the dormant gleanings of fled from her immortal coil.

But eventually she managed, and she made her way to the kitchen, as if she owned the place (because, she did.)

So it was only with confusion- rather than insubordination- that the maids seemed to object to her presence in the food preparation area of the mansion.

Surely, it hadn't been that long since she had last been in the kitchen to cook? Some of these maids seemed familiar- surely they'd remember that their mistress did more than just, close her eyes and hallucinate wildly while her autonomic processes slowed?

There was a timid knock at the kitchen door, at some point.

"Yes?" Remilia called out, toyingly.

The door peaked open, and a little human's bright blue eye looked into the room. "Um...
"You may come in, of course," Remilia said, "I did invite you here, after all.

"Um! O-okay...."

"So, Sakuya," Remilia said, "Today, I'd like to show you how to make crepes. They're a tasty dessert from my homeland."

"Um- Okay!"

"We start with the pancake batter," Remilia said, gesturing to the flour and eggs, and cream and butter and sugar. "You see, it's 'pan', because it is flat, and 'cake', because it is a sweet bread."

"Oh! Um. ...." Sakuya tilted her head to the side

Remilia smiled. "Also, pan means 'bread' in Japanese, the language we are speaking- but you don't need me to tell you that."

"Oh! Then, it, was a pun? Heehee...." Sakuya said.

Remilia waved the air, "That's because it's a loanword from Portuguese, originally derived from the Latin word Panem."

"Oh- um...."

"And Crepe is a French word, originally derived from the Latin Crispus, meaning 'curled'."

"Oh! Because, a crepe, is curled in on itself?"

Remilia smiled. "Precisely."

Remilia walked her new protege through the steps to make the pancake batter. Sakuya seemed nervous at having to decide for herself how much flour and milk was required to create the batter of the right texture, but after Remilia demonstrated, Sakuya seemed comfortable making her own batch- by copying everything Remilia had done. It was adorable.

"Now, we will let the mixture chill for thirty minutes," Remilia said. She put the mixing bowl in their ice locker, on a shelf next to some cuts of deer and a few chicken carcasses.

Sakuya nodded. "O-okay."

"And in the meantime, we can make the filling."

Sakuya nodded. "Mhm!"

"Are you partial to any particular flavor of fruit?" Remilia said, as she gathered the eggs and cream and the relevant cooking utensils.

"Um," Sakuya looked down, before raising her eyes. "Do you have, strawberries?"

Remilia snapped her fingers, and another maid appeared. The maid held a woven bowl of fresh
strawberries. She then began mixing the filling ingredients.
"I'll separate the filling into two bowls- one for each of us."

"Oh, okay. Is, it bad to mix them?"

"Well if they're the same, no. But I like some extra iron in my food, and i imagine that you don't, so," Remilia placed down one mixed bowl, "This one is for me, and then next one, can be for you."

"And now, is the part that requires the most practice to be proficient at."

Remilia turned up the flames on the cookstove and waved the crepe pan on its open flame.

"The trick is to get just the right temperature in the pan, before you pour the batter on. And you will need to rotate the pan to heat the pancake evenly."

Remilia demonstrated. Sakuya seemed impressed.

"You will get a feel for how long it takes to heat, and when the batter is cooked,"

"And then-" Remilia flipped the crepe, on its pan

"Oooo!" Sakuya said. She clapped her hands.

Remilia smiled. "Yes, it's very impressive. And necessary to cook it evenly."

Remilia tossed the finished pancake onto a dinnerplate, and spread some filling onto it, and folded it, thus completing the desert.

"And that's all there is to that. No reading necessary, huh?"

"Oh! Yeah, that's right!" Sakuya said. She giggled, twice.

Remilia smiled. "Now, why don't you try?"

And Sakuya did, and her third try turned out rather well.

And then they ate the fruit of their endeavors.

it was, a certain quiet contentment that overtook Remilia at that moment, as they ate dessert next to each other.
"Um, can, I try some of yours?" Sakuya asked, "Just- just to see how its different-"

Remilia smiled. "Well, if you're sure. I imagine it won't taste all that good to you."

Remilia cut one corner out of her crepe, and she impaled it on a fork.

And then Sakuya pressed her hand into her lap and closed her eyes and opened her mouth-

Remilia paused, for only a moment, before feeding the human.

And Sakuya closed her mouth around the morsel of dessert and immediately made a face and grabbed at her throat. "Ah- umm! It's- different..."

Remilia chuckled at that. "It is, though that is why we made two. To account for different tastes."

Sakuya nodded, and swallowed. "Do you think, Flandre would like some?"

Remilia took a deep breath.

Her sister had been acting a little more civilized recently. It was likely good to reward such behavior.

"I suppose," Remilia said, "Though I only made one crepe with extra iron. Why don't- "

And Remilia almost said 'we', - as in, she almost suggested that the two of them cook a gift for her sister together, and then visit the dungeons together (And there were even odds that Flandre had escaped her bounds at this given time, and would not even be in her dungeon when they check)-

Remilia cleared her throat.

"Why don't you try making one all on your own, then? A test, for the end of your lesson today."

Sakuya jumped out of her chair. "Oh! Okay, yeah!"

And Sakuya did manage to make something that reasonably resembled a crepe, so, the evening was a success.

Chapter End Notes

Im gonna retcon it that Remilia is a variant on traditional vampires, in that shes reanimated corpse, and doesn't need to sleep, while Flandre being a Daywalker means that she would need to sleep, and also can be seen in mirrors and walk in the sun- the latter of which is canon, im pretty sure.

I'm latently wondering if Remila's musings on how nice sleep is are getting obtuse, but
if they are, that's entirely in keeping with her character in this AU.
An Evening on the Town, with Child in Tow

Chapter Summary

Flandre takes Sakuya shopping.

Chapter Notes

Bloop. So, like, this was supposed to be a love story between unrepentant murderers, and, I kind of feel like, I mostly just wrote a story about two outcasts with controlling family members, and then Sakuya came in and upstaged everyone. But, maybe that's okay. Though, i will try to get back to roots.

And, I've seen more and more people point out that violence against disenfranchised women and violence against sex workers for cheap laughs or edge factor is dehumanizing and . So, I'll add to that pile: "Don't kill prostitutes; sex work doesn't make anyone less human and deserving of rights", and i'll also hope that maybe enough other people have done it by this point that maybe I can get away with, only depicting it without deconstructing the attitudes around it, by just, being kind of meta about it here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flandre walked along the cobblestone road between the Scarlet Devil mansion and their nearby human city. 'Walked' being an unusual thing for her to do when traveling; normally she'd fly, but because Sakuya couldn't fly, it'd be kind of rude to leave her grounded. And while Flandre could have carried the baby human all the way there, it'd probably just embarrass her, since Sakuya was still at the age where she still at least pretended to care about social mores and what puny humans thought of her.

"So you've never been to town before?" Flandre asked.

"Oh-" Sakuya said. She clutched her basket to her chest. "N- no, I haven't..."

"Heh, I actually thought you were from this town," Flandre said.

"Oh! No, I'm um." Sakuya glanced at her feet, "I'm from somewhere else..."

Flandre waited, but Sakuya didn't say anything else.

"So..." Flandre said, rolling the word around her mouth, "You, mentioned your grandmother made clocks?"

"Um," Sakuya said, to her feet, as she kicked them as she walked, "Yeah...."

Flandre waited, but Sakuya didn't say anything else.
Flandre waved off her curiosity and refreshed her smile. "Anyway," Flandre said. She held her arms out and floated, just slightly, as she spun around to face Sakuya and away from the bridge leading to the edge of the population center.

"Welcome to our town! I forget its name, but it's were we get all our sh- crap, and where we get our employees and-" Flandre tapped her chin and frowned with the right half of her mouth. "Well, I guess 'crap' covers most of it."

"You- you own this town?" Sakuya asked.

Flandre smirked. "Not in name, but House Scarlet holds exclusive dominion over this wretched hive of dysentery and workplace abuse. So, if we need anything they have, they have to give it to us, and if we wanna break any buildings for any reason, we can." Flandre tapped her chin and frowned with the right half of her mouth. "Well, i guess that does kind of mean, we own it in name."

"That's cool! I mean, except, the, um, dysentaries and, abuse- but, um, how does, the first part work?"

"Well," Flandre said, "Unfortunately I was born after feudalism went out of vogue so I can't verify the statement, but Remi tells me that the principle is the same. Though they aren't bound to the land and they largely govern themselves-" Flandre pontificated theatrically, "We are the Lords and Masters of this fiefdom: We extract tribute from the vassals who live here, in exchange for defending them from invaders and, like, helping them out in other ways sometimes."

"Oh! Huh. Did, you ever have to do that?"

"Well, Remi had her estate constructed a few decades before Gensoukyou, seceded or whatever, so we didn't have to fight to take this land, which is usually where the big fight happens. I think we've had a few raiders in the early days, though," Flandre smirked, "Until I got to deal with them." Flandre tapped her chin and frowned with the right half of her mouth. "Though i suppose, at this point, they've had more to worry from me than from outside raiders..."

"Oh! Okay. Um, Are the humans happy?"

"Not at all," Flandre said. She grinned, "But see, it's not our fault; when left to their own devices, it only took a century to propagate squalor, disease, massive class inequality, debauchery of the highest order, and frequent nighttime murderings."

"O-oh...."

"But see, a sustainable amount of them at least survive, so its all," Flandre smiled with the right half of her mouth, "fine, probably."

"There's, um, " Sakuya checked her watch, "Nighttime, murderings?"

Flandre smiled as she recalled fond memories. "Yes, and most of them aren't even my fault." Flandre pontificated theatrically. "I started looking into it after I met the fifth serial killer from big cities; turns out, there's actually a recreatable environment that causes humans to lose all empathy and, just, want to kill their fellow Man, repetitively and consecutively."

"S-so you, um." Sakuya smushed her mouth together, "hunt the humans here, for, um........"

"...food?" She said the last part very meekly.
"On, no," Flandre waved the air, "Mostly no. I just think it's fun to chase down human prostitutes.

"So, you, just, hunt these people, for sport?"

"Not all of them. To keep it fair, I only prowl the dockside, after dark, on random days so most of the time they're off the hook."

"So, is it, always humans?"

"Yeah, human hookers."

"Is- it, um." Sakuya said. She glanced down. "Is it a race thing?"

"Oh! Oh no, no no no," Flandre said. She floated up to Sakuya and tilted the baby human's chin up, so that Sakuya could see how sincere Flandre's expression was.

"I don't target human prostitutes because they're human- I do it because they're usually out at night, many of them are homeless, and almost all of them lack the kind of support system to provide a stable herd or shelter that would help them ward off an apex predator in their environment," Flandre frowned with the right side of her mouth and tapped her chin, three times.

"So it's really more of a class thing."

"Oh." Sakuya said, weakly, "Huh."

"Though," Flandre said. She frowned with the left side of her mouth and tapped her chin some more, "Most of it came from a suggestion one of the other serial killers gave me, so, she might have had different motives originally, some of which may be based on more than just class."

"And again, poverty among humans is manifested differently than poverty among youkai, and most youkai wouldn't be forced to have to fish during the night to make ends meet if they didn't have stable economic prospects," Flandre said, "So, I guess it is also a race thing."

Sakuya stopped moving. Her eyes were wet and wide and wobbling and her mouth was a shakey line.

Shi- crap. Guess it turned out Sakuya wasn't just concerned about being eaten- Flandre had made Sakuya cry again, even if Sakuya was trying to hold it in. Flandre'd have to try to be more careful.

Flandre waved the air, and tried to smile, reassuringly.  "Oh, but- that doesn't mean anyone going to kill you- like, even though, like, humans are targeted because they're humans, that's not the only criteria, and it doesn't mean all humans are candidates for nighttime murderings."

Sakuya wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I- um. I know, it's just..."

Sakuya didn't finish her sentence, which was a thing she did so Flandre wrapped her arm around Sakuya's shoulder, "And besides, as long as you're with me or Remi or Kuki or Meiling (And probably Patchi, if she ever gets out of the house), nobody's gonna try to eat ya, S'kuya."

Sakuya nodded. She forced a smile. "T-thanks, Flandre..."

And eventually, Sakuya was ready to continue walking. She took Flandre's hand in hers.

"And besides," Flandre said, after they had resumed walking for a while, "I'm not even in the top 100 causes of death among humans. Statistically, they have more to worry about from dysentery and workplace abuse, and drowning, and getting trampled by horses, and suffocating from the
smoke of a wood stove, and infection, and the pox..."

Sakuya smushed her lips together.

So they went into the city. The main roads were well traveled, mortar and wood and mud encrusted walls with barred and boarded windows on either side of them Looming lopsided houses bordered each alley, occasional yellow lantern light commingling with the evening eves of fading sunlight.

And once the density of people increased Sakuya sidled up closer to Flandre's side, and she clutched her basket closer to her chest. Flandre noticed Sakuya looked at her feet more and more often, too.

Sakuya needn't have worried, because the humans in the city gave them a wide birth. Flandre suspected it was because her wingspan, and the sharp nature of her particular wings, discouraged people from coming too close. And also she was a stone cold killer who regularly terrorized these streets, and they were right to be afraid of her. And maybe they recognized er as part of the noble family that owned the land.

Flandre patted Sakuya's arm, reassuringly, twice.

"Are you okay, kiddo?" Flandre said.

Sakuya gulped, and she forced a smile. "It's - big!" Sakuya said,

Flandre chuckled. "I can see how you think that."

Sakuya smushed her lips together "Is- is this, not, that big?"

"Well, it's certainly bigger than some of the shrine maintenance villages or small farming communes around Gensoukyou," Flandre said. She tapped her chin. "But I visited London at the height of the British empire, and Meiling showed us around the Qing capital on the way to our first visit here. They were both at least a hundred times as big as, possibly even the biggest population centers in Gensoukyou."

Sakuya froze, and then she held out her hands and muttered some numbers under her breath.

Sakuya resumed walking. "How was that sustainable?"

"Well, they imported their food, and they had a tooooon of squalor and class inequality and workplace abuse," Flandre said. "And, hey, maybe they've collapsed since then. I don't keep up with news from the other side of the Barrier."

"And we do own some farmland, a ways off the other side of the river," Flandre gestured vaguely to the south, "So there's more going into keeping this place alive than just what you see. And Remi had some inspirations from her experience in large cities, that she used to help raise the population
density of this wretched hive." Flandre smiled at a passerby, who shirked and quickened her pace.

"Oh, so- is our city, the biggest one in Gensoukyou?" Sakuya asked.

Flandre tilted her head to the side and inhaled through the corner of her mouth. "Well, former hell is physically bigger, and has more infrastructure, though it's really, really depopulated. And who knows how accurate their official demographics count is? There's a smaller village bordering Ententai, and I think, maybe a couple more settlements around some of the shrines?"

Flandre pontificated, "And officially, humans aren't allowed in Youkai mountain, but anyone know's that's a lie. So, who knows? maybe they're bigger."

"Huh," Sakuya said. She smushed her mouth as they walked through the streets.

"If you like, I'm sure we'll be able to take you to visit the other human towns sometime," Flandre said.

Sakuya brightened at that. "O-oh? I- I mean, if, it's not too bothersome.

Flandre chuckled. She patted Sakuya's head. "It wouldn't be too bothersome to bring you along, but yeah, if we ever have reason to visit them, we'll take you!"

Sakuya seemed pleased with that. "Okay!"

"Now," Flandre said. She looked around the plaza they had wandered into. "Let's check out the market, first- we can get some ingredients, for your cooking, and also maybe a fresh baked sweet pie or a fancy trinket for you as a treat~?

"Oh!" Sakuya said. Her face brightened, but then she glanced down and she bit her lip, "I mean, I, shouldn't..."

"Sure you should! It'll be my treat," Flandre said. She smiled."

Sakuya's smile returned, and she blushed, slightly. "O-oh! T-thanks, Flandre!"

Flandre smiled with a sound effect. "Hey, no sweat."

So, Flandre escorted the baby human through the market, relishing the frightened, nervous smiles that each market keeper gave her when they approached.

And Sakuya did end up, not-so-subtly admiring one particular oddment a fancy knife, with a silver handle, embossed with some kind of fancy design. An elegant weaving adorned the grip.

"Oooo~" Flandre teased, "you like sharp things, then, Sakuya~"

"Oh! Umm." Sakuya smushed her mouth together. "I mean, I don't just like clocks...." Sakuya cleared her throat and stood up straight and closed her eyes. "I'm, ek-lek-tic."

Flandre chuckled. She ruffled Sakuya's hair. "That's right! I see Koakuma's lessons are paying off."

"Oh!" Sakuya said. She beamed. "Heehee, yeah!"
So Flandre whispered something into the shopkeeper's ear, and the knife was placed in a fancy box, which Flandre presented to the human. Sakuya thanked her awkwardly and hugged the box to her chest.

Sakuya admired her gift as they left the store. The blade glinted in the evening light, and it caused the passersby to give them an even wider berth.

"Um, Flandre- you, um," Sakuya said, at some point, "You didn't, threaten the shopkeeper for it, did you?"

Flandre laughed. She waved the air, "Not at all! I actually asked if she needed someone killed, to see if I could pay in that way, but alas, she did not. So I only payed with money."

Sakuya smushed her mouth together.

Chapter End Notes

There was originally a bit about how, since prostitution is most common among a specific kind of gender presentation, it was also a gender thing, but that might imply that Flandre actually knows what prostitution is, and it also might have detracted from the scene being about Sakuya's acute awareness of the status of humans in this horrifying nightmare AU of Gensoukyou.
Sakuya learns to cook; human flesh

Chapter Summary

Exactly what the title says.

Chapter Notes

I guarantee no expertise on or even basic knowledge of how to gut and prepare a human body for eating.

So, trigger warning for, like, gutting and cooking people. Feel free to just skip to the next chapter.

It's like, you make cannibalism a metaphor for the objectification of second-class citizens as reducing them to merely utility, and then you're locked in to trying to appease the Hannibal crowd. Well, here you go.

And seriously, don't try this at home. Not just because it's inhumane and illegal; I basically just found some guides on how to butcher pigs and chickens and combined them, so I'm sure it wouldn't actually be accurate.

And like, I guess I could have tried to get a hold of a copy of one of the many cannibal cookbooks out there, but that seemed, a little far to go for a joke. Maybe next time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flandre carried the dead human over her shoulder on their way back to the mansion. The sun was setting, which was a shame, since Flandre liked the sun. It was one thing her sister didn't have on her, and also it was like, warm and bright and ultimately the source of all life energy since it powered plant growth and all life either ate plants or ate other life that ate plants and junk.

And since they walked along the dockside most of the way out of the city, people didn't bat an eye in seeing a mutant vampire lugging a human corpse with a small human maid in tow. Or, maybe it was just that Flandre's reputation preceded her and nobody was willing to even look at her funny, lest they end up on her other shoulder. It could also have been that her wingspan was unwieldy enough that people just didn't want to bump into the sharp shards of colored glass.

And Sakuya was still on board with the plan (Flandre even confirmed that, several times, and Sakuya affirmed that she was willing to be brave.), even though she seemed kind of ill at ease at the thought of death (it was something she'd grow out of in time, probably). She clutched her basket of spices and cooking materials.

"Anyway, that's the town," Flandre said, as they left the town premises. "Theoretically you can visit here anytime, now that you know the way."

"Oh! Ummm, yeah...."
"But if you want an escort, I'm sure any member of the staff would be willing to accompany you—like just hit me up anytime." Flandre smiled.

Sakuya smiled too. She nodded. "Okay!"

And they entered one of the side entrances to the mansion, the one that was just a short hallway down from the kitchen and the meat locker and the pantry and the stairs down to the blood cellar.

"There's a cleaning room off to the side of the kitchen, which maybe you've been in?"

"I—um, I got a peek, once." Sakuya said. She nodded, determinedly.

"Yeah, whenever a staff member brings home some game or just buys something from the market, they'll bring it here for processing."

And after dropping off the basket of spices in the kitchen proper, Flandre escorted Sakuya into the meat processing room.

The processing room was a somewhat gloomy little section of the mansion, there were no windows, and the walls and floor were rough hewn stone, and a single lantern hung from some dark oak crossbeams above. A big part of the floor was depressed into a metal grate that led down into the fertilizer room in the dungeons. There was a door to the hallway, and then one to the kitchen and then one to the freezer. The walls were lined with shelves that held their impressive assortment of meat chopping knives, as well as the various other tools that are necessary for the endeavors. There were spare buckets and a stepped stone area with three different sinks at different elevations, sticking out of a somewhat crudely carved stone surface, and a scratched up wooden table in the center of one side of the room.

"First, we have to strip the body, and drain it." Flandre pointed to a trash bin and a gambrel on a nearby shelf.

"Umm," Sakuya said. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did help Flandre with that next step.

"Since we're vampires, the blood is useful," Flandre said. She picked up a nearby container and placed it under the carcass. "So we'll harvest the blood. The existing torso wound isn't ideal, but it didn't hit any major arteries, so most of her blood is still in there," Flandre explained, "So, we'll make another slice across the throat so the blood will drain faster."

And once the corpse was hanging from her feet and leaking blood from a new gash in her throat onto glass decanter, Flandre started filling some small buckets from the wall faucets.

"Next we gotta wash it down. Puny Hu—Flandre caught herself, "Well, lower class, sentient individuals, tend to not bathe so frequently, so we would prefer to do that posthumously, before we attempt to eat them."

"Umm," Sakuya said. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did help Flandre with that next step.
"While we wait for gravity to do her job, we can prep the carving knives and the butcher knives. Like, your new knife-" Flandre said, "That's actually a flensing knife, which is designed to cut the fat off of animal corpses.

Sakuya smushed her mouth together as she looked at her knife, "Oh! ummm...."

Flandre tried to smile humorously but also reassuringly, "So that was a useful gift, turned out, huh? You can pretend I planned it out that way."

And Flandre helped Sakuya prepare the rest of the cutting implements as they waited for gravity to do its job.

"So, humans are covered in hair over their entire bodies- either actual visible hair, or like, weird little white hairs that, I guess, help you sense air vibrations?"

"Oh, what?" Sakuya said. She brought her right forearm up to her nose and squinted. "Wieerrrdddd."

"I know, right?" Flandre said. She smiled. "But yeah, we can either dip the carcass into scalding water to soften up the hairs to scrape off, or just skin the whole corpse."

"Oh! Ummmm...."

"Skin gives a certain texture to the meat cuts, so I usually just go for the scraping. "

Flandre pulled a large iron cauldron- one of the same size that the maids would use to bathe in-into the center of the room and had Sakuya help her fill it via bucket chain from the faucets.

"And normally we'd have to light a fire under it to boil the water, but we have access to magic," Flandre pulled a fire crystal off on of the shelves and uttered the trigger word right before she crushed it and dropped the remains into the cauldron. Orange points of light radially effervesced throughout the water and then small bubbles appeared at random points along the surface and a noticeable amount of steam rose up through the air.

"Alright, stand back so you don't get splashed-"

"Ummm," Sakuya said. She did so.

And Flandre hovered up and unhooked the gambrel from the ceiling, and dropped the carcass into the water. It splashed, but not far enough to hit Sakuya, and there was a fizzing sound as the outer surface of the flesh sizzled.

"Alright, now we can scrape the hair off," Flandre said. She wiped her hands on each other and then shook them in the air.

"Umm," Sakuya said. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did help Flandre with that next step.
And after that part, Flandre quickly washed her hands. Sakuya followed suit, on one of the sinks at a lower elevation.

"Alright, so now's the time for the actually cutting," Flandre said. "The first thing we do, is remove the intestines, since that's where all the gross stuff is. We could clean them for use in sausages later, but that's for filthy youkai of Germanic decent, haha,"

"Um. Heehee?" Sakuya emitted. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did help Flandre with that next step.

Flandre quickly washed her hands. Sakuya followed suit, on one of the sinks at a lower elevation.

"Next step is the actual butchering," Flandre said, "We make a cut from the sternum to the groin," Flandre pointed to the relevant parts, for Sakuya to cut.

"Ummm," Sakuya said. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did stepped forward. That was when Flandre realized that Sakuya was a little too short to reach the relevant parts of the carcass, and that she herself had subconsciously started hovering, so she got another blood bucket from the relevant shelf, and turned it upside down for Sakuya to balance on.

"Then we can scoop out the organs," Flandre said, "Since she's upside down, if you just pull on the lower guts, the rest should just, fall out." Flandre pulled a bucket into the projected fallout zone.

"Ummm," Sakuya said. She did, and she jumped back to avoid the guts falling into the bucket.

"Then we split the rib cage open," Flandre said, "The tips of each rib are made of cartilage, so it's easier for your chest to move when you breath.

Sakuya put her hand to her chest and took a deep breath, as if to test that theory. Flandre decided to do so as well, since she actually did breathe, despite nominally being a vampire and thus a living corpse.

"And that makes it easier for us, since we can cut through that much easier than hacking through actual bone."

"Oh! Okay. Um." Sakuya said. She didn't say anything else, and she helped Flandre with that next step.

Flandre quickly washed her hands. Sakuya followed suit, on one of the sinks at a lower elevation.

"Then," Flandre filled some more buckets, "We wash out the cavity." Flandre hefted a bucket of water to throw water into the open chest cavity.
Sakuya lifted a bucket with both her hands and heroically attempted to use momentum and the second law of Newtonian mechanics to direct water accurately into the chest cavity of a hanging carcass with enough force to dislodge the unwanted pieces of meat. She wasn't very effective.

Flandre chuckled, "That's okay, I'll get this part, then. You wanna get me an ice crystal?"

And after Flandre was done with that part, she quickly washed her hands just out of habit, even though she didn't actually touch any raw meat during that last step.

Sakuya waddled up next to her and held out a shimmering light-blue hexagonal crystal.

"Thank you," Flandre said. "So, normally we'd store the meat for a day in the cold to dry it out and make it easier to chop, but, again, we have access to magic, which is actually more consistent than just, stoking it in a freezer for a few days." Flandre flicked the crystal with her finger. It resounded with a *tink*. "This is actually a dehydration spell linked with some ice magic, instead of just elemental ice, and it'll uniformly chill and dehydrate the carcass, rather than like, us relying on, whatsit, invective cooling?"

"Conductive cooling," Sakuya said.

Flandre pointed at the human and smiled, open-mouthed. "Yeah, that!- to prep it for the next step."

Flandre uttered the trigger word right before she crushed the ice crystal and pressed the remains into the carcass's now empty chest cavity, Cyan points of light radially effervesced throughout the carcass and then small fractal ice formations appeared at random points along the exposed interior of the meat.

"And magically flash freezing it helps retain the flavor, too, for like," Flandre waved the air as she tried to remember the exact reason you needed to freeze a carcass before cutting it up, "some sort of reason?"

"Slow freezing does allow more time for large ice crystals to grow, yeah," Sakuya said. She nodded confidently, "And that could break up the meat cells, which would negatively impact the flavor, maybe."

Flandre nodded. "That makes sense. The meat I had to eat outside Gensoukyou would usually have like, big ice parts in it, and it was pretty bland."

"Anyway, now, we remove the head," Flandre said.

"Ummmmmmmmmm..." Sakuya said. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did help Flandre with that next step.

"We can pickle the brain in vinegar, and eyeballs are a delicacy for the Tengu, and the jowls make for pretty good bacon-"
"Ummmmmmmmmmmmmmmm~...."

Flandre closed her eyes and waved the air. "But we can just set the head aside for a different chef to prepare later."

"O-okay..."

Flandre walked over to their assortment of cutlery.

"So, i think they're called Daikatanas here, though I knew them as zweihanders," Flandre said, "But where I'm from, you wouldn't waste energy trying to kill a horse and its rider with one swing, so we just had pikes and bayonets and cannonade and good old fashioned fisticuffs."

"Umm," Sakuya said. She tilted her head to the side.

Flandre picked up a curved sword that was taller than she was and brought it back to the carcass, "And also back where I was from, you'd just grab a bone saw and slowly hack through the neck and then down the middle, but I guess the master swordsmiths wanted to make swords that could slice a human in twain and so people wanted to keep doing that."

"Ummmmmm" Sakuya said. She tilted her head to the other side.

Flandre waved the air and smirked. "And I'm just playing grumpy here; this way is actually way more fun."

She twirled the giant sword one last time in her hands and then held the weapon out towards Sakuya. "You wanna give it a try? It is pretty fun. You need to chop the head off, which is an easy horizontal strike, and then we chop the carcass in half, so its a downward vertical strike, and the legs will help funnel the blade into the right direction."

"Ummmmmmmmmmmmmm," Sakuya said. She examined her watch. "O-okay."

Sakuya emitted an 'oof; as she struggled to pick up the the giant sword. And then, there was a blur around the human, and the carcass was then beheaded and bisected, and Sakuya held a slightly bloodied samurai sword, awkardly, in her outstretched hands.

Flandre clapped her hands. "Oooo, good job!"

"I- um," Sakuya said, "I cheated- I actually did just, slowly saw through the parts...

Flandre chuckled, "That's fine- the cuts look clean, and since a lot of its going to get chopped up anyway, it doesn't matter that much."

"And then, the two best cuts are the breast meat and the shoulder meat," Flandre said. She waved the air, "Something about, the amount of fatty tissue stored in them."

"Ummmmmmmmmmmm..."

"Shoulders are relatively straightforward; just cut a chunk off, but you do have to cut through bone," Flandre said.
"Oh! ummmmm..." Sakuya emitted. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did help Flandre with that next step.

"And as for the breasts," Flandre said, and she pointed to the relevant parts of the meat during her explanation, "You want to cut from where they connect to the pectoral bones, around at the armpits, all the way around to the center."

"Ummmmmmmmmmmmmm," Sakuya emitted. She didn't say anything else, though, and she did help Flandre with that next step.

"Alright- we can do the rest of the cuts later-" Flandre said, "or you can just let one of the other maids finish up. You did really well, today, Sakuya." Flandre tried to smile as encouragingly as she could.

"OH! Um, T-thanks, Flandre!"

Flandre almost reached out to tussle the baby human's hair, but then she remembered she hadn't washed her hand since handling the carcass.

"There's just enough time to get a dish ready, for my sis, if you haven't lost your nerve?"

"Oh! Yes, I'm still, good to go. Yeah." Sakuya clenched her fists in front of her and nodded once, in a determined fashion,

Flandre helped Sakuya cut two steak cuts from the shoulder and a few strips of bacon from the flanks of the corpse and bring them into the kitchen.

"So, Remi likes steaks, and they're really just, cooked, so they're easy," Flandre said, "And bacon can be pan seared. And they go good with, i think, mashed potatoes and some kind of vegetables," Flandre said.

Sakuya nodded. "Okay!"

So they mushed up some potatoes and boiled some green beans- which were still pretty gross, but were some of the less gross vegetables, in Flandre's book, because they were mostly watery and flavorless.

And Flandre helped Sakuya put strips of bacon on a buttered skillet and watch the meat slices sizzle to the point where they were cooked.
"So, steak is actually pretty easy;" Flandre said, "There's no marinade or herbs or anything; it's all on the meat quality and how close to the optimal time you cook it is."

Sakuya perked up, then. She pulled out her watch. "Oh- um, do, you know what the optimal cooking time is?"

Flandre scrunched her mouth to the side and shrugged, "Well, since different people like their stakes done to various degrees of done-ness, you can get away without it being exact."

"Um- 'done-ness'?"

Flandre nodded. "Yeah, I, think it's something to do with the way the meat changes in response to heat? Like, you can cook it to rare, where it's cooked but in a way that's till mostly pink and there might be some blood in it (Me and Remi like our steaks on the rarer side), or well-done, where you cook the meat to the second level of cookiness, and all the meat is brown because that's what meat looks like when it's been cooked to that level, and then there's various levels of Medium which mean different amounts of the steak are cooked to the first or second cookiness levels. (And that's definitely the scientific terminology, bee-tee-dubs.)"

"Oh, huh. So that's why cooked meat turns brown."

"So the upshot of that is, you don't need to worry about getting the steaks exactly right, since different people will prefer it different ways."

So they investigated some of the cookbooks held in the kitchen cupboards, (Sakuya still couldn't read all that well, but she managed to help Flandre read some nouns and definite articles) they found a rule of thumb that Sakuya felt she could work with to start off.

And Sakuya watched the steak cook through the window, with her hand clutching the pocketwatch of her's that didn't have the lid on it. Occasionally she'd blur, and at one point, she blurred a lot and the steak appeared on the table.

"Ooo, that looks good!" Flandre said.

Sakuya glanced at the floor. "Oh! T-thanks!"
And at dinner time, they managed to intercept Remilia. Flandre bid Sakuya to present the fruits of her labor.

"Oh! Um- M-mistress Remilia...." Sakuya began. She didn't say anything else in time, so Flandre took over.

"Sakuya wanted to make you a dish," Flandre said, gesturing to the human, and to the human meat. "And I know you like steaks, so." Flandre

"And was it, just, Sakuya who wanted to cook for me?" Remilia said, pointedly, to Flandre, with a stupid smug smile.

Flandre looked at the wall. Her brow furrowed. "Well, i mean, you helped her make me some desserts, so I'm just repaying my debt." Flandre smushed her mouth together and mumbled the next part. "It's not a big deal or anything."

Except Flandre knew that if she didn't repay the favor, or even just take too long to repay it, Remi'd bring it up all passive aggressively the next time she wanted to make Flandre feel bad.

But hey, at least she got to spend some quality time with her new best friend, and also teach said friend some important life lessons. This was, like, turning bad situations into good ones. Or like, adding the silver lining to the rainclouds.

Remilia took a bite and chewed and swallowed and smiled. She turned to the human. "It is incredibly delicious, Sakuya. Good work."

"oh! Um," Sakuya clutched the front hem of her skirt and looked at her feet, smiling sheepishly, "Thank you, Mistress."

Remilia chewed another bite. "Are you sure this is your first time cooking steaks?"

"Oh!- um, cooking, meat, yeah- but Flandre was there to help!"

Remilia nodded as she chewed another bite. She continued to seem satisfied with the food quality.

"Did you want to try a piece, Sakuya?" Remilia said. She cut a corner off her steak and impaled it on her fork, and held it out toward the human. "It'd be a shame for you to miss out on such a good meal."

"Oh! Um," Sakuya smushed her lips together, and glanced at the ground. "That's- that's okay...."

"You sure? It really is delicious- you're really coming along as a chef."

Sakuya beamed, but she still looked at the floor and clutched the front hem of her skirt. "T-thank you, Mistress!"

And then Flandre stepped back to grab her plate and she started digging into her own portion of the meal.

And the steak was really tasty. Like, sure she said that to encourage her and would have done so even if the food was bad, but when she tasked Sakuya to cook the steak rare, the human managed to time it pretty much exactly right. The muscles around Flandre's teeth clenched together as if to get closer to the perfect combination of juiciness and flavor.

This time, Flandre knew her hands had been washed since the last time she had touched raw meat,
so she ruffled Sakuya's hair. "Yeah, you did really well."

And then the rest of the permanent staff arrived for dinner.

"oh Man, are we having human steaks?" Meiling said, "That's awesome."

"Oh! Umm....." Sakuya said.

Patchouli was escorted to her seat by her familiar. "What an excellent surprise. If you could give me half of one of the more well-done pieces," She patted her stomach, "My digestion's been acting up recently."

Koakuma looked at the food, and then at Sakuya, and then at the other humanoids who were digging in. she elected to just grab some green beans and mashed potatoes.

"This meal was prepared by our very own Sakuya," Remilia said, after the other youkai finished serving themselves.

"Ah, really? This is so good!"

"You are a natural, young Sakuya."

"From the available parameters I do not detect evidence to refute such a claim."

"oh! Ummmm," Sakuya said. She smushed her mouth together and managed to nod. "T-thanks...."

And for the next six months, Sakuya was a vegetarian.

Chapter End Notes

So, humans and pigs are both omnivores; that's why cannibal tribes in the Caribbean were able to sell human meat as "long pork".

I don't know if there was any specifically french pork recipe i could have just done instead, and i'm actually pretty sure beef and pork are different enough that the steaks for them would be different, so again, don't try this at home.
A Night on the Town, more alone than ever.

Chapter Summary

Koishi remains sad.

Chapter Notes

I guarantee no expertise in nuclear family dynamics in industrial-era European cities, or Koishi's canonical power set.

I apologize for the creative liberties taken with Koishi's powers throughout this whole fic (where she doesn't seem to do all that much with subconsciousness and is basically just Celebrimbor), and I saw an opportunity to BS some mumbo jumbo to try to make it not so outrageously non-canon. I'll, reaffirm my attempt to try to make her slowly grow into her canonical power set.

I, think i might have accidentally posted this chapter in its incomplete state, early? So, I guess, free preview if you saw it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koishi wandered the human town nearest to the Scarlet Devil Mansion with no small degree of guilt. Like, this was Flandre's favorite hunting ground, and she was here just, violating it.

But while the vampires did claim to protect the town, the population itself was mostly humans, so, there was nothing to worry about, like, danger wise. Unless there were other horrible monsters lurking about the town, in which case Koishi would relish a fight, being one of the most powerful youkai she knew.

But tonight, it was only humans about. And again, they were not dangers; merely simple creatures wondering when the next time they'd get fed. Similar to Youkai, perhaps, though Youkai had the wherewithal to hunt their food themselves.

And with her ruksack over her shoulder and her workboots newly dirtied, Koishi made her way down through narrow alleyways, mortar and wood and mud encrusted walls with barred and boarded windows on either side of her. Looming lopsided houses bordered each alley, occasional yellow lantern light commingling with the silver of a full moon.

To maximize space, houses expanded outward with each new story so that even some of the roads wide enough for carts turned into makeshift tunnels in some parts, a wretched smattering of urban tumor that was growing vertically now that the horizontal directions between rivers had been filled.

And Koishi walked down one particular narrow alley, through the fog and lantern-shadows, up to one particular door, and she cast a simple unlocking spell as she grasped the doorknob.
Koishi opened the door and stepped inside. "I'm home!" she called into the thatched hallways.

"Mamma! Mamma!" chanted her two children. They ran up to Koishi's petticoats and danced around her in small circles.

"Hey there sweeties," Koishi said. She ruffled both their adorable little heads.

And her wife looked in from the kitchen, wiping weathered hands on a dishrag. "Dinner's lamb today, dearie."

Koishi flashed a smile. "Awesome."

And Koishi pulled off her coat and boots and washed up and made her way to the head of a dinner table that was an old door nailed to an old wooden barrel.

A warm meal of peppered meats and potatoes was placed before her. It was delicious.

And she watched as her facsimile family talked and ate and then washed up and they all adjourned to a cozy little room with some cozy little couches around a cozy little fireplace. The children played on the ground, and the adult human resumed a knitting project.

"How was work at the cannery, dear?"

"Pretty canny," Koishi said. She smirked at her children. "As opposed to, uncanny."

Her family blinked.

And that was the unchangeable truth of the world; that nobody laughs at your puns, even if they purport to love you unconditionally— even if they purport to love you because you stole the identity of someone they loved and on top of that were psionically manipulating them into loving you.

See, this was what Koishi was reduced to now; puns. The ultimate sign of desperation.

And maybe, this was a sign that she was no longer interested in seeking that moment of connection with the most-

The most wonderful, adorable, powerful (besides Koishi herself, of course), most impetuously recalcitrant person in all of the accessible world.

But Koishi wanted to feel that more than she wanted to earn it, so in pursuit of the unreachable, it was just one deep brain violation, a shallow grave and a change of clothes and Koishi could have any life she wanted, as one ancient void filled a fresh one and the shadow of a shadow gave the illusion of substance.

And so Koishi found holed up in a little house in a not-so-bad part of a not-so-bad town, where she had sent a not-so-bad parent down the river and assumed her identity and stole her not-so-bad
family, to just get a taste of the unconditional kindness and affection that Koishi couldn't seem to have with Flandre.

Just to get a taste of the ability to believe that Koishi was worthy of unconditional kindness and affection, that she couldn't seem to keep from Flandre.

And the opportunity to try to forget how Koishi had lost the chance to get such kindness and affection, and maybe, hopefully, to forget why she ever wanted such dumb, weak things in the first place.

Flandre had a new best friend. And it made sense, because Sakuya could actually be remembered.

And maybe Koishi was looking more for a romantic partner than a friend. And that going through the whole rigmarole of having to do the first encounter with Flandre over and over- until they were finally able to share some moment of intimacy, some actualization of shared longing- maybe that wasn’t worth it.

Koishi really wanted to have that, and maybe she was okay with having that with someone else.

Someone she could share everything with, and who would support and love her.

But this temporary family couldn't really give her that, not really.

Like, for instance, Koishi could be trying to telling them relevant stories, about herself or life in the city or life in general, but now, as they were gathered around the living room, Koishi was merely telling them outlandish tales she had just made up on the spot. Like, if her extra eye was still intact, she could have just plucked them from the heads of the relevant people, but instead she found herself relying on observation and memory- which really was just, remembered observation, so it all came down to being aware of one's surroundings, and wasn't there a saying about how losing one sense makes your other senses sharper? Alas, that was the cost of blinding her third eye--a well considered cost, to be sure, and a cost that Koishi occasionally had doubts about, but those doubts always ended up with a reaffirmation of a cost that was worth it. And it wasn't like she could take it back, so, maybe she was just trying to make herself okay with a circumstance she couldn't change.

But, it was a cost none the less. But costs are an opportunity, and changes are just, like, when you close one path in favor of another.

And over the centuries, some of those other paths meant the opportunities to wield a different power set.

One of which was the ability to control the void she left in people's minds, and then, direct what they filled into that void. Altering familiar memories, and occasionally pruning the errant thought. It allowed her to, with some effort, say, become the beloved head of a small human household, for maybe about two weeks.

Boredom was usually the limiting factor, rather than ability, but the longer Koishi exerted control over a mind the harder it got, on top of her becoming more drained.

Maybe it was that she just called it boredom, when really it was the inherent emptiness of living a lie.
So tonight, Koishi resolved to be a loving mother one last time, and after reading her stolen children one last bedtime story and kissing her wife goodbye one last time, Koishi made one last excuse to be up a little later, and she sneaked out of the house one last time.

And one last time, Koishi wandered the cobblestone paths, in plain view, relishing the way the humans skirted to the side of the road around her, not wanting to get on the bad side of a strange Youkai who was also in all likelihood one of several competing serial killers out tonight.

And there was a river, here, through the town. While it wasn't competing with many other urban centers, the town probably wouldn't have grown as large as it had if it didn't have access to easy trade routes via the river that split to encircled and bisected it.

But since there was a river here, that meant, there was a shortcut back to home.

It was a simple ritual, if you knew what you were supposed to do, and if you had the unique form of conviction required.

So Koishi took one last quiet, solemn walk along the river banks, letting the wooden houses grow smaller, and then thin out, and then recede behind her. She spent a moment sitting by the river bank, hugging her knee, just, letting her brain churn though nothing in particular, serving only to procrastinate.

And then, once she was far enough away from other people, Koishi closed her eyes and wove a spell and let the longing pervade her being, and a wooden bridge adorned with fading red Torii appeared over the river.

Except on the other side of the bridge, there wasn't a sparse field in the night of a rural human settlement, but the red glow of a pallid doomscape in the dusk of its hellish day cycle.

And Koishi took three steps across the bridge and then sat down on the edge, where the railings had rotten away enough to pose a serious safety hazard that was also a convenient nook to dangle your feet off of.

"Hey again," Koishi said, to the bridge.

And the Hashihime that guarded the bridged crawled up over the side and gave her a look.

"Again?" Parsee said. She tilted her head. "Do I know you?"

Koishi waved the air. "Just pretend we do. It'll go faster this way."

"Eh, you meet one sad loser, you meet them all," Parsee said, "Now get off my bridge."

Koishi leaned on her back. Parsee huffed.

"I'm really sad," Koishi said. "And I'm here to vent."

And Parsee glared at her for a second, and then swore at her.
Ah, and now I'm ending up doing three darkish heavyish chapters in a row. I'll try to make chapter 47 pretty fluffy though.
"Piss off, jerkjob," Parsee said, "I'm not your goddamned therapist."

"Nah, don't be like that," Koishi said. She leaned back on the bridge and closed her remaining eyes.

"You just want someone who also feels sad so you can try to feel better about how shitty you are."

"Well newsflash pissbucket," Parsee spat, "Everyone's sad. It doesn't make you special, or interesting, or worthy of attention."

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side and exhaled.

"And ironically, that's exactly what you want, right? To feel like you're not alone?"

Koishi didn't answer. She figured if this was an audience participation part of the show, she's find out fast.

Parsee stood up and gesticulated violently. "It's called 'masochistic epistemology'- whatever hurts is real. So you're only willing to believe emotions or facts if they make you sad or angry or upset."

"But since your brain is stupid, you think it works both ways, in that you think anything that makes you sad and angry and upset must be true, so you seek out some bellowing screechlord who'll confirm your biases for you so you can keep wallowing in a circle jerk of self pity."

"And that's all just so you can feel better about hating everyone, especially yourself- because if you're a bad person, then it's okay to hate people."

"But newsflash again, sphincterspelunker, everyone hates everyone. Everyone's hateable. It doesn't make you special or interesting. And it doesn't make you worthy of feeling okay about how shitty you're being."
Koishi exhaled, deeply. Yeah, that was the stuff.

"Because why are you sad?" Parsee spat. She continued gesticulating violently. "You assgargling immortal magical empress, you. We're living in a perfect little garden made specifically to cater to all the dumb needs of Youkai, to live out the rest of the known universe in absolute luxury until the end of days- what right do you have to have everything going for you, and still feel sad? You're just pissing away this gift that other Youkai worked so hard to get for your ungrateful ass."

Koishi made a silent laugh.

"You could be happy right now if you just got off your fat lazy ass and started self-actualizing to get yourself some lasting fulfillment. Nothing's stopping you. Literally the entire world was built to allow you to succeed in whatever you chose to do. To get whatever you want, no matter how banal or useless or stupid- and therefore, to be happy."

Parsee looked over to where Koishi lay. "So, why in god's tits don't you?"

Koishi assumed she wasn't meant to answer, still. Which was just as well, because she didn't know what to say to that.

Parsee answered for her. "It's because you don't want to be better. Not really." She pontificated towards the riverbank. "Because it's called 'masochistic epistemology; that whatever hurts is real, and if you actually stopped hurting, you wouldn't feel real."

"And it's easier to look for an excuse for why you're bad than to actually try to get better."

"So blame yourself, or other people, or the nature of the universe. It'll give you something to complain about at least, right?"

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side. She felt, that saying 'yes' to that was the wrong answer.

"And the best kicker is," Parsee said. She laughed, forlornly, but it may have been a cry, "The fact that this generic misanthropic rant applies to you just confirms that you're not special."

Koishi blinked with her remaining eyes, then. Damn, was that true?

Parsee stood up and stretched and sat back down, in a different position.

"So what set you off this time, eyeball?"

Koishi blinked. "Wait, you want me to answer?"

"Some kind of family issue?"

Koishi didn't say anything to that.

"You yell at your friends? Your friends try to make you happy but it didn't work and you felt shitty for letting them down?"

Koishi didn't know what to say to that.

"No? Then, maybe a lover's spat?"

Koishi made sure to not say anything to that.

Parsee grinned insufferably. "Oooh, a lovers quarrel then. You piss her off? She piss you off? You
find an inexplicable emptiness in your recent interactions that you blame on yourself?"

Koishi figured out what to say, just then. "How- did you know that?"

Parsee gave Koishi a look like she was the stupidest thing in the world, "Uh- I have eyes? Cause I didn't get them poked out. Or maybe it was you that poked it out?"

Koishi briefly considered that maybe just getting into a fight would make her feel better than trying to sympathize with an angry jealously spirit.

Parsee nodded. "Yeah, you needed to hurt yourself to feel real, blah blah."

"That wasn't it." Koishi said, through gritted teeth.

"No? Well, it doesn't matter. I mean, not any more than any other part of your psyche that inflects every waking moment of your life does, right now.

Parsee adjusted her sitting position. "But the real answer is that your trite, shitty adolescent angst isn't complicated or meaningfully distinct from other sad losers who come by here." Parsee said. Then she smirked.

"And the real real reason is that I can sense jealously, and reading your reactions is just confirmation," Parsee said. She waved her hand, and her eyes gained an ethereal viridescent forth dimension tint to them.

"And the real question is, what are you gonna do about your little girlie?"

Parsee sat down on the edge of the bridge and leaned back. "So your love seems like it died and you don't know why and it's not fair," she said, " and hey, maybe it's beyond your control. But usually, even in cases where it was nothing to do with you, you can make

"Or maybe, it was never right in the first place, and you're better off self-actualizing in other ways."

"Or maybe the reason doesn't matter, but you're overdue for change and focusing on something else would do you some good just in general."

And Koishi got a little bit distracted as she pondered on that last bit.

Like, you throw a dart at every part of the board, one of them will be a bullseye. Maybe that last bit was worth something.

Koishi sat up, then, and Parsee cut her current thought short.

"Oh, had enough bitchwhistle?"

"Ah-" Koishi began. She didn't quite know how to respond to that.

"Yeah, make like a pussywillow and leaf," Parsee said, "If you actually stuck around longer, I'd have thought something was more wrong with you than what's just readily apparent, from just looking at your face."

Koishi chuckled in spite of herself. "Well, I thank you for the session, Miss Hoshiguma."

"The first step is actually leaving me alone," Parsee said.
"So just do something. Dwelling on shit isn't going to help it get better," Parsee said, "And besides, that's my domain,"

Koishi almost chuckled, but on second thought it wasn't clear if that was a joke or not, so she decided against it.

And as Koishi stepped off the bridge, she leaned back and tipped her hat and smiled. "You're not so bad, Parsee. Thanks."

Parsee's face shot her another look like she was the stupidest thing in the world. "Man, fuck you," Parsee said.

"Fuck your shoes."

"Fuck your stupid knee high socks."

"Fuck your dress with the gay-ass sleeves."

"Fuck your hat with the bow on it."

"Fuck your stupid bullshit eye just flopping around."

Parsee gestured obscenely with both her arms.

"And if I see you here again I'll kick the shit outta you."

Koishi returned to the crumbling earthen palace that was her theoretical place of residence. And she supposed familiarity made it feel something akin to a home- though her intrusions into the worlds of happy working families made her acutely aware of the various amenities Koishi's supposed home lacked.

And as luck would have it, in the foyer of the crumbling overgrown terracotta, Koishi bumped into the best person to see. Not that Koishi didn't like Orin, or that she couldn't handle her sister, but if she was actually going to try to take what she thought Parsee's advice was, she'd want to seek out her least judgmental friend.

"Hey Okuu," Koishi said, with all the nonchalance she could muster.

"Hi Koishi!" Okuu said, looking up from the piece of glass she had been admiring. She waved with the whole of her arm in a greeting motion. "It- feels like a long time since I've seen you around!"

Okuu looked at the sky and visibly cogitated. "Wait, maybe that means its actually been a long time since I saw you?

"Heh, isn't time just," Koishi felt the need to pontificate herself, "The curvature of space?"

"oh, some people say that, sure," Okuu said. She waved the air. "Anyway- Hi Koishi!" Okuu then waved with the whole of her arm in a greeting motion.

Koishi smiled, "Hi Okuu. So, uh, I was wondering," Koishi inhaled and exhaled. "If I could hang
"Oh! Well, I actually have work tomorrow...." Utsuho said.

Koishi blinked with her functional eyes. "Really?"

Okuu put her fist to her chest, right above her power core, as she stood up straight and closed her eyes. "Yeah, its a very important job."

Okuu then visibly cogitated.

"Buuutt, I guess you could come along with me? I'm very important," Okuu put her fist to her chest, right above her power core, as she stood up straight and closed her eyes again, "so they'd probably let me bring a friend, as long you don't break anything?"

"Yeah, okay," Koishi said. She was probably capable of not breaking anything for at least a little while.

Chapter End Notes

See if you can isolate the unique signifiers of Parsee's voice.

I mean, they can't all be mathematically infused loquaciousness or long references to enlightenment era poetry.

And while a lot of Parsee's was appropriated rants from cartoons about depression that seek to provide comfort, if you're actually having problems, it's probably more cathartic than helpful to do what Koishi did here.

And if you find Parsee's situation depressing, just imagine her absolutely slaying at the Former Hell slam poetry/rap competitions.
How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love Okuu

Chapter Summary

Koishi reconnects with her oldest friend.

Chapter Notes

I guarantee no expertise in or even basic correct knowledge of friendship, philosophy, Touhou lore, or any sort of physics, but especially nuclear physics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koishi secretly set up her sleeping quarters in the room that allowed her to spy on the earth palace's master bedroom.

Koishi couldn't read minds anymore, so she had to spy the old fashioned way, but since her sister couldn't read her mind either, it meant that she was in a unique position to spy on the ostensible feudal lord of Former Hell.

Koishi awoke to sounds coming in from Satori's bedroom. It sounded like, music, except with static and a slight but pervasive tinny overlay to it.

"Yay!" came Okuu's voice, "I'm conscious!"

"Okuu~" mumbled Satori, "It's too early for your enthusiasm...."

Koishi was still too groggy to try to roll over to the visual port, but she heard Okuu dance and get dressed and then run to the washroom, while Rin and Satori grumbled. After Okuu sounded like she left the room, the music also sounded like it left the room.

And Koishi snuck back to her official bedroom two minutes before Okuu came to knock on its door.

"Come in~" Koishi said, but Okuu just slammed open the door.
"Good morning, Koishi!" Okuu said. She had a giant grin on her face, and she was already dressed-with her hair straightened out and her bow on, correctly.

Koishi nodded. She sat up in her bed. "Morning Okuu. Where's that music coming from?"

Okuu turned her head and then her whole body to look at a small metal box on her hip. She unhooked it from its harness and held it out. The music got louder, because it was coming from the box and it wasn't partially obstructed by the Hellraven's hip.

"Oh, I signed up for mayor Hoshiguma's Productive Citizen broadcasts," Okuu said, "And it came with a free short-range radio! It's got an alarm that plays fun, upbeat music to start your day!"

Koishi blinked. Then she grinned. "Sounds awesome. How do Orin and my sister feel about it?"

"Oh, they hate it," Okuu stated. Her grin didn't waver.

Koishi snorted.

"Anyway," Okuu said. She hooked the radio back onto her hip, "Wanna grab breakfast, and we'll get going?"

A couple minutes after Koishi left her room, dressed for the day, with her hair straitened out and her magnificent hat on correctly, she made her way down to the large chamber in the middle of the palace, where they had established their dining room- which was a table, a cookstove, and some cupboards on a rug in the middle of a large chamber of the decaying temple, where the ambient rubble and broken terracotta had been swept into the corners of what counted as the room. One large fallen pillar with a faded green stripe had been rolled near the center as something to lean the cupboards and stove against. A bamboo shoot funneled water from the one aqueduct they had since restored. Reddish hell-light came in at an angle from the distant but gaping hole in the infrastructure on the far wall.

Okuu lit several stoves to cook some rice and boil some water, as Koishi pulled out two sets of dining ware to set on the table.

And just as Okuu was setting out three servings of rice, dried fish, and miso, Orin walked in, rubbing her eyes with her right hand.

"Huh, weird to see you up later than Okuu," Koishi said.

"Yeah," Rin said. She hit a yawn with her fingertips. "She used to be the laziest of all of us. You had to push her to table and then put food in front of her, and then she'd wake up."

Okuu smiled. "Yeah, but now my days are so much better, thanks to modern technology!"

And Koishi snorted. She grinned-

Until her sister came to the table.

"Oh, Koishi," said Satori, in a theatrical deadpan, "How nice of you to join us today." She thanked Okuu for the specially prepared vegetarian dish.

"Isn't it?" Okuu said, without irony. And that was why Koishi wanted to hang out with her, this
first day of her new life.

Orin nodded at her, but otherwise knew better than to try to broach the topic.

Satori, however, did not. "Where have you been?"

Koishi ate some more of her breakfast.

"Out," Koishi said.

They ate together in more silence.

"Out where?" Satori pursued.

Koishi pulled her bowl of miso towards her and picked at the vegetables in it.

"Out and about," Koishi said, to her food.

Koishi loudly slurped her soup.

There followed a moment of silence.

"Be that way, then," Satori said.

Koishi hated how that gave her a reflexive pang of guilt. Like, why did she feel the need to have to explain herself to some dumb egomaniac just because she happened to be her sister?

So Koishi bumped Okuu's radio again, and it started playing an annoying song.

Okuu seemed to like it, though, because she started signing along, to Orin and Satori's chagrin (and that meant that the radio wouldn't get turned off, because they were too soft on Okuu.)

And Koishi decided that she, too, could simulate seeming to like it.

"So, it's kind of embarrassing, since I've known you for so long and never asked," Koishi said, as she followed Okuu through the shattered concrete streets of the fallen cities, "But, uh, what, is it exactly that a crow from hell does, for a career?"

"Oh, I wouldn't know," Okuu said, "Maybe you can ask Aya?"

Koishi blinked, with her remaining eyes.

"But I...," Okuu said. She put her fist to her chest, right above her power core, as she stood up
straight and closed her eyes. "Boil water."

Koishi blinked with her remaining eyes again. "You, boil water?"

"Yep! It's very important," Okuu said.

"Oookaaayy," Koishi said. She coughed.

And they walked along shattered asphalt and burned out metal vehicles past the faded glory of ruined skyscrapers to a reclaimed part of town. Not the big square with the neon lights and perpetual music, but a quieter area where nonetheless the signs of re-started civilization were popping up. Various Oni were setting up the evidence of domestic life around some reclaimed concrete box houses. A few street vendors selling street-cooked food from the re-purposed husks of infrastructure. Parts of road that had been smoothed and flattened out to be less uneasy as walking terrain.

Okuu waved hello at the occasional Oni they passed.

Koishi eventually followed Okuu into a section with giant junk walls and a security gate.

Okuu waved to the Oni stationed as a guard, and after some commotion the metal gate slowly lifted up-

...to reveal the Oni on the other side who was physically lifting it above her head so that Okuu and Koishi could duck under the gate and walk into the facility.

"Is the gate not working?"

"Sure the gate's working," Okuu said. She gestured to the Oni, "She's working right now."

Koishi turned back to the Oni straining under the metal gates. She made a smile.

The building itself resembled a labyrinth, but Okuu never got lost (And Koishi wondered if she didn't give her oldest friend enough credit in general). They walked inside the concrete building, past groups of various Oni, mostly wearing white laboratory coats, all wearing looks of hopeless bewilderment, some banging on control panels.

And two of the Oni opened a giant metal safe door.

"Oh! uh," Okuu fiddled with her radio, "One moment-

And the bird turned and talked with some of the Oni in hushed whispers, leaving Koishi some time
to idly glance over the hodgepodge of makeshift wires and cables and control panels with noticeable dents in them.

Okuu returned. "Alright! So, I'm going to be doing enrichment today."

"Oh," Koishi said, "That's... good?"

"Yeah- sometimes, they just flood the chamber and I'll just swim in it, to boil the water, but we wouldn't be able to hang out as easily if I did that," Okuu said, "But since I can't always be there, they've worked out a system that can work without me- BUT, I need to prep it. And that's what I'll be doing today!"

Okuu tapped her lip. "Though I guess you could also have been there in the thermally sealed lead-lined diver suit. That's a lot more uncomfortable than the regular one, though."

"The, regular one?" Koishi asked.

And as if on cue, some Oni came by with a yellow plastic full-body suit, with very thick material that was heavier than it looked.

It came with a large helmet that covered her whole head, so Koishi simply put her hat on top of it, after it was all done. It was weird, not having the familiar weight of her head ornament, but the rest of the suit was also weird- and already Koishi could feel her breath humidifying the sealed interior chamber- so, it was easy to cycle between different sources of discomfort until none of them weighted too heavily. Because the suit was already doing that.

"The radio should be set to 'voice activation'," Okuu said, and her voice was a little muted through the material, "But there's some buttons you can change to make it push to talk or even just always on."

Koishi fiddled with the small machine on the front of her suit until she got it to work when she wanted it to, often enough.

The two of them were locked in a concrete chamber. Okuu brought with her a cart of metal rods.

"And another cool thing about not having to flood the chamber," Okuu said. She adjusted her radio receiver, "Is that I can bring this in! There's an interactive entertainment channel run by the local government I like to listen to."

"Oh?" Koishi said.

"Yeah, so we can do radio activities, in the radioactivity!"

Koishi snorted. "Heh."
And Mayor Hoshiguma's pre-recorded voice came out of the machine, instructing the listeners to do various entertaining yet educational activities that also served as propaganda.

There was a metal contraption in the center of the chamber, which Okuu pulled metal pieces in and out of. She tapped her power core twice, and it started glowing a little more, and Okuu also assured her that it was getting, just, super hot.

"So, how does this work?" Koishi said.

"Well, the principle is actually pretty simple. There's actually been naturally-occurring nuclear reactors where caves of uranium have gotten flooded with water, since, that's really all that needs to happen for a partially sustained fission reaction."

Koishi blinked with her remaining eyes.

"But optimizing it in a sustained reaction requires specific configurations of radioactive elements, which you'd have to create manually."

"And, of course, boiling water isn't inherently useful on its own. But put a pin in that, real quick." Okuu pantomimed pinning something to an imaginary cork board.

"See, certain radioactive material can be made more radioactive in certain conditions, when exposed to various forms of energy or in tandem with other radioactive elements."

Okuu waved the air. "They're working on some spinny thing that will do it itself, but I can just, like, uh-"

Okuu tapped the rod to her chest.

"Like, that." she said. She hefted the metal rod, and apparently she had accomplished what she had meant to.

"Fancy," Koishi said.

"And- going, higher concept real quick-" Okuu pontificated, "What we call 'Radioactivity' is just a substance whose internal atomic bonds are unstable in ways that are prone to breaking down, releasing heat. Now, the second law of thermodinosaurs says that energy always gets worse in quality, but 'energy' in that definition exists in many forms, most of which we don't really care about, so we don't care if it gets converted inefficiently from high quality atomic bonds to low quality thermal energy."

Koishi blinked, with her remaining eyes. "Thermo, ah, 'dinosaurs'?"

"Yes, it's named after the discoverers." Okuu said. She put her fist to her chest. "I would know, because, as a bird, I am the inheritor to all that is dinosaur-"

She pointed at Koishi, dramatically. "While you only pretend to be a dinosaur-!"

Koishi pretended to recoil in horror. "Oh no! You've found me out!"

Okuu held her arms out in claw motions, and took one lurching step towards Koishi. "And as a Dinosaur, I am here to eat you-~"

"Nooooo~" Koishi squealed, pretending to be afraid.
And Okuu then barred her teeth and waved her arms around and chased Koishi around the reactor chamber, laughing almost as loud as Koishi.

Eventually, Koishi allowed herself to get caught, and Okuu tried to bite the yellow plastic suit, around Koishi's shoulder. Koishi figured it probably didn't taste very good at all.

And after they were done laughing, Okuu got back to her metal rods and machinery and also back to her explanation.

"But yeah- having just any fission reaction isn't hard. Having an optimal, sustained, constant output fission reaction is where the hard part is."

"And that's only the nuclear part of the process. Lemme unpin that old point-"

Okuu made appropriate sound effects as she pantomimed pulling a pin out of an imaginary cork board.

"So, natural nuclear reactors can exist, but they just end up boiling water, which is one way to utilize heat in a useful capacity."

"Since water is bigger once it's boiled than when it's regular water, you can boil a quantity of water to make it expand. And you can design a chamber in such a way that the steam will push against big metal parts, to move it. And if you make the parts in a circle, it can push the parts continually. This is how Steam trains work, if you remember them from outside Gensoukyou."

Koishi nodded. She did remember those fricken things.

"And spinning a wheel can be used for many things, but what we use it for, is spinning some magnets around a bunch of copper wires." Okuu made spinning motions with her arms.

"At the atomic level, wires are made of tiny areas of localized probability vectors actualized into what macroscopically appear as matter, and flowing through them are things called 'electrons'. Electrons will bump into each other, so anything the wiring is connected to will also have its electrons pushed around, and that's called electricity."

Koishi almost said that she already knew what electricity was, but on second thought, that would have probably been a lie.

"And when electrons move through special machines, they can create light, heat, or motion. So, it's useful!"

Okuu then put her fist to her chest. "And that's why my job is so important!"

"Huh," Koishi said.
And as Okuu worked and occasionally followed along with the radio activities, Koishi found a random concrete slab to sit on, and she kicked her legs out and occasionally did what the radio said. And during one intermission, it turned out that Okuu wasn't the one who made the original pun about them, and Koishi was marginally less impressed with the whole concept.

But it was sort of nice, not necessarily having to do anything but co-exist in a neutral to positive manner with a friend, even if she was in an environmentally sealed suit whose internal environment was becoming gradually more humid and clammy.

"Hey, philosophical question for ya," Koishi said, at some point. Usually, you wouldn't go to Okuu for that kind of question, but she figured in this situation, the bird would be a good authority.

"Okay," Okuu says, "I don't know much about floss but I'll do my best?"

Koishi snorted. "Ah- well- why, are we friends?"

Okuu smiled. "Because we like each other!"

"I mean, I know that," Koishi said, "But like, how did we get to that point? And how do we know we like each other?"

Okuu smiled harder. "Because when we're together, we're happy! And we got there, by being together and being happy enough that it just kept going!"

"So is, that just, the secret to it?" Koishi said.

"Well, I thiink, most people can just, co-exist," Okuu said. "And then it only takes a little more familiarity, until you become friends."

"So, is that how we became friends?" Koishi asked.

Okuu smiled a big smile. "Well, we first became friends because you gave me bread, and that made me happy, so I spent more time around you. And Rin liked spending time with me, which meant that she started spending time with you, and then we started dating your sister, and, then I guess the friendship stabalized into a sustained reaction at that point!"

Koishi managed to keep her face straight for that last bit. "So, what you're saying is, giving food was the inciting incident."

Okuu visibly cogitated for a moment. "Yeah, I guess that's right!"

Koishi nodded. "Huh. So how'd you and Rin meet?"

Okuu swatted the air. "Oh, one of the corpses she was stealing had a shiny on it, so I had to talk to
her a looong time before she let me have the shiny, and after that, I guess our sustained friendship reaction kicked in "

Koishi nodded again. "And what made you like my sister?"

Okuu scrunched her mouth to the side and visibly cogitated for a couple moments. "Well, I, guess she's cool? I guess it became a sustained reaction pretty early on, so...."

Okuu tapped her chin. "I think it was Orin's idea first? Like, we like spending time with her, but I'm not sure, how that originated...."

Koishi supposed that'd do for now. It was enough to think about, at least.

And if she didn't want to have to think about the nature of interpersonal bonds, there was always the radio activities.

Chapter End Notes

So I usually take the opportunity, in this fic, to give the supporting characters absolutely bonkers characterizations. Because if you're already making two of the characters unrepentant murderers (regardless of how popular that interpretation is in fanon), and then shipping them when they've never met in canon, then why not have fun with all the other characters, too?

But my friend who got me into Touhou has told me that this interpretation of Utsuho is basically canon. But it's a fun interpretation, so, here you go.
Dinner with Friends: A Bird, and a Cat

Chapter Notes

I guarantee no expertise on or even basic correct knowledge of, jobs, restaurants, food, romance, or urban decay.

I also took liberties with Rin's job, because burning corpses for fuel is like, the least efficient use of complex hydrocarbons made via the life reaction.

I don't think I ever bothered to characterize Utsuho and Rin in this fic, before? Most of the doujins ive seen about Satori's household that I use for reference tended to focus on how goofy Okuu is, soo, I'm just, gonna make her a little generic until I get a better idea.

Koishi supposed it wasn't the worst day of her life.

Haha, how was that for lowballing it?

No, it was actually pretty cool. Like, Koishi actually manged to get bored rather easily, but she found ways to entertain herself, usually. Which meant she was actually very sensitive to boredom.

And this, wasn't, boring. Like even though only about half of Okuu's 7 hour shift was spent talking or playing with her, Koishi managed not to get unduly, uncomfortably bored.

And after 7 hours Okuu had, touched enough metal bits to her reactor core or whatever to finish work. She powered down her reactor core and bid Koishi to go ahead to the decontamination chamber to peel the heavy yellow plastic suit off herself. The fresh air against her face was nice.

And Okuu did her, debriefing? Some sort of final meeting with a gaggle of confused looking Oni and Okuu (who, Koishi noted, always looked sort of confused, but maybe that was just her default expression so it wasn't indicative of her actual mindset- and perhaps, all the Oni wandering around the concrete bunker/ lab were of a similar facial disposition) where they looked at charts and little dials and stuff that probably was significant to the people who know what they did.

Okuu got her things and escorted Koishi out of the concrete bunker. Cheery Oni in lab coats waved at her.

"Usually, I go surprise Rin at her work, once I'm done," Okuu said.

"So," Koishi ventured, "How is it a surprise if it usually happens?"
"Ooh, I'll show you when we get there?"

After Koishi's embarrassing misunderstanding regarding what exactly it was that Orin did for a living, she ascertained that the Kasha gathered corpses- just the bodies- and brought them to the open air flesh market. Fresh corpses were sold as meat, older ones became leather or fertilizer, and the rest were turned into fuel.

The whole process ended up having nothing to do with the Shinigami, but it did indirectly affects souls, so, maybe that was where Koishis' original confusion came from.

Once they neared the market, at the end of the day, where it was mostly the frugal Oni waiting for the prices to drop at the last minute, Okuu put a finger to her lips and snuck off to a flanking position.

And one moment, Rin was haggling with a customer, and the next, she had been tacked from behind by her long-term bondmate.

"Gak!" Emitted Rin, as her arms flew out and her eyes unfocused as Okuu collided into her back.

They tumbled out of the stalls, onto the ground. Rin was on her back, with Okuu over her, her arms on either side of Rin's head.

Okuu smirked, "Hey kitty-," She soothed.

Rin healed and smirked back. "Hey birb."

And they smooched, on the mouth. Some bystander Oni cheered.

And Okuu helped Rin to her feet and also helped her finish her job- mostly by lugging corpses from storage.

And Rin was done with her work for the day, and ceremoniously pulled out her pipe to smoke.

And Okuu hugged the Kasha from behind, and leaned over to Rin's left cat ear, at the side of her head. "Koishi wants distractions, so maybe we can go out to dinner today?" Okuu whispered, but (probably unintentionally) loud enough that Koishi could hear.

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side, but in a nonchalant way. Guess it was pretty obvious, huh?

"Well, Koishi," Rin said, louder, directed behind her, "Do you want to get dinner? We know a
good restaurant."
Koishi shrugged. "Sure."

So Koishi's oldest friends—who worked in the city and thus were actually familiar with the layout—led her to one uniquely reclaimed building.

It might have actually been a restaurant in a previous world, but now the Oni had... Oni-fied it. Like, with large animal skulls and an expanded bar that was mostly just a bunch of kegs and barrels, and they filled the aesthetic aquarium with mewling souls from the river Styx and some decorative weapons.

"The usual table, please," Orin told the maetr—the mairtar—the person who'd job it was to seat customers.

The Oni nodded and took them to the seating areas. "Table fer three, rite up!"

Koishi smirked. "Is Satori going to be upset at this?"

Heh, it'd be another way to annoy her sister, if it was.

Okuu waved the air. "Nah. Part of the arrangement is us going out to do intimate things without her, and then Satori gets to feel good about overcoming the intense feelings of alienation and betrayal that arise from it."

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side. Damn, maybe—if she really needed to—she could just ask her sister about how she did that.

Orin nodded, matter-of-factly. She took a drag from her pipe. "It's true."

Okuu nodded again. "Its called 'emotional cucking'."

Orin choked, slightly. Some smoke came out her nose. "That is not true—"

Okuu ignored Rin. "There's some Buddhist tenants about it."

Orin finished choking. "That—might be true?"

Koishi laughed.

They got seated at a rectangular piece of scrap with a tablecloth on it. The menus were actually on paper, which meant they either had a paper mill up and running or had managed to import it from one of the cities in mainland Gensoukyou.

The recipes, however, were most likely a native creation.
Not that Koishi had gotten used to western food in the Scarlet Devil domain, but like, a lot of this menu was, just, random meat thrown together? Like, why would anyone chose to eat haggis?

Koishi adjusted her hat and her third eyeball so she could lean her head on the table as she perused the menu.

Koishi got like three lines into the menu before the waitress arrived and Okuu ordered some noodles and eyeballs and Rin had a roast liver, so Koishi tried to speed-read the menu.

"I think she needs a little more time," Rin said.

"Tha's aight, taeky yer time."

Koishi took a breath and slumped over on the table.

But she figured, at least they had potatoes, and some kind of steak looking thing, so she'd just order that to avoid not having an order until the waitress returned.

Koishi put down her menu and turned to the "How is, ah, Oni cuisine?" Koishi asked.

"Meaty," Okuu said.

Orin nodded. "It does have it's fair share of meat."

"They've managed to grow some potatoes in the reclaimed farmland, and some of the wild fruits are edible," Orin said, "But since rice takes standing water a lot of it's imported."

Okuu perked up. "Oh, but Mayor Yuugi's trying to get some aquaponics set up so we can sustainably grow our own rice. And they're looking at grafting fruit trees onto tamarisk so they can survive better."

"We have our own orchard, though," Koishi said, "at the palace."

Orin chuckled at that. "Yes, our 'orchard'."

Okuu smiled. "The palace of Earth Spirits is less radioactive than the rest of Former Hell, so our trees grow reliably."

"But I wouldn't necessarily say we have, a formally cultivated set-up of blossoming trees."

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the other side, "I mean, have we thought about, like, fixing the place up?" Koishi spitballed.

"That's an idea," Rin said. "Utsuho was telling me you were, looking for some distractions?"

Koishi scrunched her mouth the the side and bobbed her head slightly. "Ah. Yeah...."

"You're welcome to help me out at my work tomorrow," Rin said.

Okuu nodded. "And we'd all be supportive of fixing up the palace!"

"And if you're just looking to distract yourself, actually, that's the primary industry here," Rin finished. "There's clubs and gambling halls and bars everywhere."

"You can live without the necessities if you just have some of the luxuries,'" Okuu stated.
"Yuugi's band actually performs at the *Last Tour* tavern every other Thursday.

"-Which is *this* Thursday!" Okuu exclaimed.

"And she's very sociable, and always looking for volunteers for the city." Orin said.

The waitress returned and took Koishi's order and her menu.

Koishi rolled her head around on the table. "I don't know if I want to commit to, like, community service...."

"That's fine. Yuugi's very understanding of that, since most Oni wallow about in hedonism all day," Orin said.

Koishi idly glanced at some of the other tables, where Oni were slumped into their leftovers, napping. "Yeah, sounds right."

And the food arrived. Koishi picked at her only slightly mutated tubers and animal flesh. Okuu popped some eyeballs into her mouth and Rin extinguished her pipe and started cutting her liver into pieces that fit on her fork.

"So Rin, Koishi was wondering how we met," Okuu said.

"Well, more specifically, how you became friends," Koishi said, "And then more than friends."

Orin smiled softly at the wall. "Ah. Well," She turned to her girlfriend, her smile slightly brighter, "She was relentless."

Okuu smiled with her eyes closed. "Ehee~"

"At first I didn't like her, but then she grew on me," Rin said. "Like a fungus."

Koishi snorted.

"And, just, one day I thought I'd give it a shot, so I started courting her."

"Yeah?" Koishi said.

"Yeah, so we spent a few years, just, co-existing," Orin said. "Dancing once a day. Wandering waterfronts looking for earthworms. Protecting our territory from humans," Rin waved the air, "you know, bird stuff."

Utsuho rubbed the back of her head and, somehow, smiled even more doofily. "Eheeheehee~"

Then Okuu got more serious. "But we did cat things too!" She said.

Rin flinched and looked nervous. "Ah, she doesn't need to hear about tha-"

"Like chasing the red dot!"

"That was a joke-"

"And accumulating lint for a nest."
"That was one time-"

"And applying lateral pressure to each other's torsos to release endorphins in our frontal cortexes."

Rin made a smile, despite herself. "Okay, that one was true."

Koishi let herself smile too. Happiness was infectious, after all.

Orin coughed. "But anyway, what brought this on, Koishi? We're happy to help for any reason, but color us curious."

Koishi pressed her face into the table. "I- ah."

She took a breath. "I tried some things, in Gensoukyou proper, " Koishi said, quietly. "They, didn't work out."

Luckily, Rin didn't demand further explanation.

Rin cut a piece of her liver into a forkable portion, and ate it.

"Well, you're fighting an uphill battle, wouldn't you say?" she enunciated around her mouthful of food, "Since you can't be remembered?"

Koishi allowed herself to shrug. "I guess...."

"So it's admirable that you're working at it."

"Yeah, but if they keep not working, what's the point." It wasn't a question, but more a statement of intent.

Rin took another bite of food. "Would you say that you gained nothing from your time there?"

"Yes."

"Really?" Rin said, "Nothing at all?"

"I, guess I learned what not to try...." Koishi said, "And, sure, some of it was fun."

"See?" Rin said. She smiled. "No time is ever wasted."

"And besides, there will be more time, in the future. Don't worry about any past failings, because you can always just try again."

"But what if I can't?" Koishi said, reflexively, " What if there isn't more time?"

Rin took another moment to cut up her meal.

"Okay, honestly, sometimes you have to tell yourself things to keep you going." Rin said. "Maybe there wont be another time to get it right. But if that's the case, there is literally no reason to dwell on the past, since you can't even learn from it for next time."

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side.

"But also honestly," Rin said, "Gensoukyou's not going anywhere, and you're functionally immortal, so, sure, maybe some specific opportunities will pass you by, but there will always be more different opportunities."
Koishi allowed her frown to fade into neutral as she nodded in agreement.

"And besides," Rin said, "We're still your friends, Koishi."

"Yeah!" Okuu said. "We'll be here for you, always!"

"And we'll help you out in any capacity we can."

Koishi took a breath. "And maybe that can be enough?"

"Maybe!" Okuu said.

But on the way out of the restaurant, Koishi lagged behind her friends to look at the wares of one of the streetside stores.

A ways in front of her, not quite out of earshot, Okuu nuzzled Rin's head.

"I knew you'd know what to say, Rin," Okuu said.

"Ah, well, I just tried being honest."

"Yeah, you're so smart, Rin!"

"T-thanks-"

"And you're cute, too!"

"Oh! Ah-"

"And your tails are sexy~"

"U-utsuho~"

Koishi pretended to be very interested in the broken windows on a nearby dilapidated skyscraper.

"What, I'm just being honest," Okuu said, and she smooched Rin, on the cheek. "I like you, Rin!"

Okuu said, between smooches, "In fact, I loovvee you~"

Rin's face turned completely red, but she stopped resisting. Rin stood up on the tips of her toes to give Okuu a passionate smooch, mouth to mouth.

And Koishi sighed, and she turned away, and that familiar feeling of alienation grew outward from her chest.

Because, sure, Rin and Okuu were there for Koishi, as her friends, as much as they could be-

But it wouldn't be like how they were there for each other.
And that meant Koishi lied, back in the restaurant. It wasn't enough.
Another Funeral: Robbing the Dead

Chapter Summary

Koishi reconnects with her second-oldest friend.

Chapter Notes

So by this point, you probably know that this fic takes liberties with characterization and powersets, but also locations. I like painting settings a lot, and I hope in this fic its entertaining enough that you ignore the blatant non-canon elements in them.

And if not, then, my bad, there's always MORE Gensoukyou to corrupt, muwahahaha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koishi followed Rin to work, the next day.

Rin's routine was less exuberant (and that was, at least today, a good thing) but also more rigorous (which was, at least today, a good thing- probably) than Okuu's. Like, no waking up to music, no obeying Yuugi's indecipherable accent as best she could as they did radio activities in the radioactivity, but also no dancing and no singing to the occasional song Koishi had heard before.

Breakfast was still fine, but since Okuu didn't wake her up early, Koishi didn't have any peaceful time without her sister there to quietly judge her. But at least, today, Satori didn't say anything specifically at her.

Rin brought her own wheelbarrow today, and she pushed it along the parts of shattered asphalt that had been smoothed and flattened out to be less uneasy as walking terrain, maneuvering between burned out metal vehicles past the faded glory of ruined skyscrapers to a reclaimed part of town-the big square with the neon lights and perpetual music. Various Oni were setting up the evidence of domestic life around some reclaimed communal block huts. A few street vendors selling street-cooked food from the re-purposed husks of infrastructure.

"So, I guess, I now know what you generally do, for your job," Koishi said, as they walked, "But, specifically; what are your day to day duties?"

"Well, you know (now) that I steal corpses," Rin said, "So most of it is managing the corpse supply. Everyday I look at our stockpiles, and there's one big decision I have," Rin explained. "If the stockpile's running low, well, corpses tend to pile up in the wastes, so we can get a good
reliable haul of low-quality corpses if we prioritize scavenging there."

Koishi nodded.

Rin picked up her wheelbarrow to get it across a large crack in the road. "But in Gensoukyou, we can try robbing corpses from funerals, which are generally of higher quality, but we also generally have to acquire them individually. Higher quality corpses get snapped up by cooks, collectors, decorators, or weird mad scientists pretty quickly, but they also fetch a higher price. So if we need funds, we can prioritize crashing funerals."

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side. "But the wastes are closer, since you don't have to leave Former Hell."

"But all the roads beyond the city have had zero repairs, so it's harder to maneuver through them." Rin gestured to one particularly large pothole, with a husked-out vehicle sinking into it. "Whereas we can have Parsee just materialize the bridge to the rivers right nearby each of the human settlements if there's some fresh corpses around there. It ends up taking similar amounts of time either way."

"Huh," Koishi said.

They checked in at the corpse market. Rin leaned her wheelbarrow against one of the walls as she checked the reports and the ice box and the other employees.

Koishi looked around said other employees- some variously drunk Oni sitting in chairs next to registers that suggested they were supposed to be clerks.

Rin stepped out from the back room and stretched her arms. "Well, we actually have a fair bit of corpses, and money's not tight, sooo," Rin gestured towards the store's wheelbarrow, in one back corner. "We can do a wasteland run this morning, then crash a few funerals this afternoon, if that sounds interesting to you?"

"Yeah, I guess," Koishi said. She shrugged. "So, your job is centered around stealing?"

Rin waved the air. "Oh, no no- Yuugi had us incorporated last year, so it's not 'stealing', its 'acquisitions'," she said, "or potentially, "civil forfeiture.""

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side. "So Oni culture prioritized re-inventing loopholes before, like, paved roads? Or masonry?"

"Well they can't lie, so they had to find a workaround for dishonesty somehow," Rin said. "And besides, we don't need masonry: just get some scrap in a tepee and throw some skinned hides over them."

Koishi couldn't argue with that.
Rin sat and seanced, on an uncluttered part of the shop's floor. There was a tingle in the back of Koishi's teeth and if Rin opened her eyes Koishi knew they'd be all, like, mystic-y and junk, but Rin usually preferred to keep her eyes closed when doing this.

"Alright, looks like," Rin parsed, "There's a couple bodies in a funeral home over at Youkai Mountain..."

Officially, Youkai Mountain didn't have any humans, but their food and service economy relied on the existence of an uncounted number of humans with no formal legal status. So, just like most civilizations.

"It seems a prostitute washed up over at the Scarlet Devil Townsend..."

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side and nodded and sighed. "Sounds about right."

"And- ooo, someone fancy recently died over in Hakugyukoro. They're not that populated, so the death rates rather low."

"Huh," Koishi said.

"Yeah, we should try hitting that place up, since we don't get a lot of stuff from there."

As far as Koishi knew, Remilia was one of the only youkai who actually wanted a large human population. Which was a little weird, because she was one of the youkai that didn't prefer to eat the whole human, so, why would you need more of them?

But yeah, Koishi was vaguely aware of Hakegyukoro (Their resident ruling youkai was, ghost related or something?). It'd be cool to see it.

"Sounds good," Koishi said.

Rin had Koishi borrow the wheelbarrow from the market while she used the one she'd brought from home,

And the waste run wasn't so bad- Koishi could lift the wheelbarrow easily, so the holes in the road weren't even a problem (And Rin was able to just ambiently sense the general direction of corpses, so they never even had to, like, triangulate their positions based on distant landmarks.)

But then two hours later, Koishi changed her mind.

"Uuggghh, this thing's heaaavyy," Koishi said.

Like, the wheelbarrow itself was actually a little heavy, but not unmanagably so, if you were excited for a new task and it was still the beginning of the day. But with 5-ish partially rotting, partially incomplete corpses piled in, it was both heavy and unwieldy, since now she had to worry
about spilling them if she didn't maneuver the thing right.

"But hey, we got twice as much as I normally end up getting," Rin said, "And it's good for exercise."

"Uuuggghhhhh," Koishi whined.

And after they dropped their morning haul at the corpse market they stopped for lunch at one of the nearby Oni food carts cooking Street Meat on a reclaimed water grate over a fire that also seemed to be fueled by meat.

"Yeah, Oni food is pretty meaty," Koishi said, between bites, as they sat on a cleaned up autobus seat leaned against a concrete Oni art installation, in the shade of a skyscraper.

Rin munched on her meat. "I mean, if you wanted like a baked potato, there's a stand selling those down the block."

"I mean, this is fine," Koishi said, taking a bite out of her oversized ball of meat on a stick, "But I think the fact that 'Street Meat' is an item in the Oni diet, says a lot about their cuisine as a whole."

Rin shrugged. "Probably."

It turned out, someone (someone with presumably infinite patience and/or alcohol) had previously negotiated some kind of deal with the guardian to Former Hell.

So Rin just had to show a badge (and say that Koishi was with her) and drop off a bribe, and Parsee would retreat back under her bridge with a few of her less creative swears and a couple obscene gestures and the other end of the bridge became a chilly coniferous noosewillow forest on the edge of the netherworld.
And they meandered through slight fog between bleached barked trees along a pale cobblestone road.

Once the village came into view, Rin pulled out her pack and prepared some burglary tools. One of which was a mask that covered her face.

"So, are you," Koishi said. then she giggled under her fingertips, "A cat burglar?"

Rin's eyebrows flattened- and that was pretty much all of the expression she was capable of making with the mask on. "Never heard that one before."

Koishi leaned out from the bushes, to where what appeared to be the majority of the local population gathered in a semicircle around a raised podium in front of a religious-looking building.

Koishi stretched her back and patted her third eye for good luck. "You don't need to do that; I'll handle this one."

"Wait- Koishi-" Rin said,

Koishi waved the air. "I've stolen piles of things. It's fine."

"But-"

Koishi took one big leap, to land at the edge of the furthermost seating at the ceremony.

Her entrance made enough commotion that the funerary proceedings halted and the religious leader at the podium

"Hey there," Koishi said, to one human who ended up making eye contact with her.

The number of funeral goers stopping to stare at her approached 100%, especially once Koishi jumped onto the platform that had the coffin and the presiding... priest? or whatever.

"Excuse me, madam," Koishi said. She smiled and tipped her hat at the religious leader leading the funeral-

And Koishi hefted the coffin into her arms.

"Uugh, this thing's heaaaaavyyy," Koishi said, aloud-

And that seemed to kick everyone else into action because suddenly a pair of humans rushed her from the front of the audience.

Koishi swiveled on her left foot and then twisted the coffin in her arms to avoid the first one, and she tossed the coffin at the second one, knocking her to the ground. Koishi tipped her hat at the fallen human as she retrieved the coffin. Then Koishi broke for the nearest building.

And Koishi took three breaths and relaxed her mind and thus her psionic aura, to ease the process
of being forgotten, and she ran out into one of the alleyways, and then another alleyway, and a third.

"R- erm, Number Two!" Koishi called out, into the scenery, once she figured she put enough breaks in line-of-sight between her and the funeral.

Rin appeared right behind her, holding some kind of bag. "What do you mean, 'number two'? I'd be number one, since this is my job."

Koishi laughed. "Yeah, but I got the corpse-"

Rin's expression flattened and she opened the bag-

To reveal a fresh human corpse, all dressed in her funerary finest.

"That's what I was trying to tell you. They fill the coffin with rocks as a decoy, and hide the corpse somewhere in the temple."

Koishi opened the coffin to reveal that, indeed, it was filled with rocks. She kept her expression flat. "Oh," she said, fighting the urge to be embarrassed.

Orin smiled. "But you were a great distraction."

Koishi smiled and rubbed the back of her head, "Heh. Just, as planned?"

Rin slung the bag over her back. "Though, what happens to the stuff you end up stealing?"

"Well, normally people end up forgetting them too, since most things aren't import- ah." Koishi said.

Rin's expression flattened even more, even though Koishi could only see the Kasha's eyes around the mask.

Koishi felt that latent sting of embarrassment for the second time in a minute, but she reflexively tamped down on it, because, like, psh, whatever.

"So, say, the subject of an entire ceremony, might still be remembered by the members of that ceremony?" Rin asked, slowly.

"Well they'd forget me, at least-" Koishi waved the air.

And on cue, a serious looking youkai emerged from an alleyway a block down, shortly followed by a batalion of samurai, and saw the two of them.

"Oh cool," Koishi said, "These guys still have their feudal traditions-"

"There they are," yelled the youkai. She hovered and violent giestflame erupted around her form but more so at her outstretch arm. "Get them, you fools!"

"Welp," Rin said, tossing Koishi the bag and grabbing the coffin as she ducked under a magic missile, "Lets book it."

Koishi only laughed.
The escape was even more exercise than Koishi was used to, not in the least because they were trading two heavy unwieldy props between them whenever their maneuvers had them cross paths.

At the final place they were supposed to meet up, Rin got cornered.

On the edge of the village, where the last paper houses made way for the pallid vegetation and ambient gathering fog.

Rin sighed, and picked up the bag and approached the humans and their ghostly master.

And Koishi took the opportunity to slowly back into the woods, with the coffin.

"Catch!" Rin said, as she flung the bag into the group of waiting samurai.

Koishi was just about out of earshot when the villagers discovered that they swapped the bag with rocks.

And they were pretty sure they weren't followed when they met up again at part of the nearby river Parsee's bridge was currently manifested at.

"Hahaha!" Rin said. "Looks like decades of trying to make decoy coffins backfired on them!"

Koishi flexed her arms. "Heh, silly humans."

Rin glanced over her shoulder.

"Hey Parsee, what's a creative way to say 'in your face'?"

Parsee's eyes bugged out and she made obscene gestures with both of her hands, directed at the pair of them. "May vermin procreate atop seven generations of your inbred bastard children, you boogersnorting cuntwrecker."

Koishi snorted.

Rin took a moment to stabilize her expression. "Eehhh, it's, a little harsher than what I was going for," she said, to Koishi, but also loud enough that Parsee could probably hear, so they weren't technically being rude.

Though of course, considering Parsee continued to swear at them, maybe it wasn't that big a deal if
they accidentally were a little rude to her.

And after they got back to the shop, it was some simple customer service for the rest of the day. Most Oni knew what they wanted, and talking to people was pretty nice. And since normally people forget the clerk five minutes after talking to her, Koishi's memory thing wasn't even a problem.

And near the end of the day, Koishi saw Okuu trying to sneak up on them, out the right side of the market.

Okuu put a finger to her mouth, and Koishi nodded.

"Rin, on your left!" Koishi yelled.

Rin turned to the left-

And Okuu barreled into her from the right.

"Gak!" Emitted Rin, as her arms flew out and her eyes unfocused as her partner collided into her back.

They tumbled out of the stalls, onto the ground. Rin was on her back, with Okuu over her, her arms on either side of Rin's head.

Okuu smirked, "Hey kitty~," She soothed.

Rin fast-healed a scrape on the side of her face as she smirked back. "Hey birb."

And they smooched, on the mouth. Some bystander Oni cheered.

Okuu helped Koishi out, arranging corpses in the ice box.

"So, how was today?" Okuu asked. "Better than yesterday?"
Koishi paused.

Well, it was more distracting, and running from those samurai and the ghost Youkai was pretty exhilarating.

"I mean, not because, Rin is more fun than you," Koishi said.

Okuu waved the air and smiled. "Nah, I get it. But she doesn't have a radio to listen to!"

Koishi snorted. "That is true. But, yeah, I, guess, I could get used to this? But I do just, want to take tomorrow off."

Okuu nodded. "Yeah, Rin's work is hard- but she's good at it, because she's awesome!"

Koishi smirked. "Sure."

Okuu tilted her head to the side. "You could maybe see if you could help out Satori?"

"Eeeuuughhh," Koishi emitted, involuntarily. "I'd, rather try community service."

"Well, we could see Yuugi about that!" Okuu said.

Koishi nodded.

Chapter End Notes

I figured since Parsee's character in this fic is, basically a splash of cold water to the face, I'd just lean into it. Like, I can't just mention everyone's favorite sad bridge troll literally "Bridge Princess" without giving her a line.
Soil Bio-remediation in Irradiated Ecosystems

Chapter Summary

Uh,

You know, there's, kinda a lot of conflicting elements in this one.

Koishi meets Yuugi, and works on becoming a gardener.

Chapter Notes

Gak.

I guarantee no expertise in, filial relationships, bars, agriculture, radiation, environmental science, masonry, or the phonetics of a Scottish accent.

And since this was taking so long to punch out, I guarantee no cohesive theme, throughput, or proofreading. But that last part, you probably already expect from me.

I knew at some point i was going to do another, better Yuugi chapter, but then she had reason to pop up in this one so I dedicated to go for it, but then I lost my confidence in being able to accurately write about science or with accents, and then a 9 week hiatus happened (-_-').

But, whatever. If you like it, cool! If not, I can pretty much guarantee the next chapter will be completely different. And if you're of a background that means you'll spot all the inaccuracies, then, sorry!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koishi decided to sleep in the next day. it wasn't like she had any particular reason to be awake at any certain time, right? Like, that was the joy of being a youkai in Gensoukyou. Like, sure, Rin and Okuu had jobs, but that was because they derived some sense of fulfillment from doing menial tasks for external authorities. Koishi had no doubt they were important to the infrastructure that developed around Former Hell, but like, if either of them, just, didn't show up to work one day, nothing bad would happen. Well, maybe Former Hell's economy would collapse, but like, nothing bad would happen to the important people in this situation; i.e, Koishi's friends.

But after rolling around in her bedsheat for long enough that it lost its appeal, Koishi decided to sit up and yawn and find where her hat had rolled off to and then finally start her day.

And she realized that sleeping in may have been a mistake, because if she missed seeing Okuu and Rin before they went to work, she wouldn't get to see them until the afternoon.

Which meant the person Koishi was most likely to bump into during the day was, ugh, her sister.
Eventually, Koishi figured, you know, it didn't actually matter what Satori thought or said or told Okuu or Rin about her, so like, there was no reason to avoid her if there was something else Koishi wanted to do around the Palace.

But on the other hand, Koishi didn't have anything particular to do around the palace, except maybe wander it trying to find something to do, so she could just sit in bed until Okuu and Rin got back.

But on the third hand, well, that was how you ended up, just, not doing anything, so Koishi decided to go forth despite the aimlessness of her intentions.

Koishi wandered the palace, wandering amid ancient, overgrown stone Bodhisatvas, riddled with cracks and illuminated by shafts of red hell-light from holes in the ceiling, itself a crumbling, faded tapestry depicting a forgotten story of heroes and deities lost to time, amid various vines and some particularly nice-looking flowers.

Somewhere, in one of the less-traversed areas (like, did it say something about human nature that you have a whole palace, but you end up living in the foyer and occasionally the basement?), there was, theoretically, a little pairidaeza in the center of the Palace of Earth Spirits, open to the sky with space to grow a couple dozen trees.

And there was, theoretically, a water system to actually make it a pairidaeza instead of just a hole in the center of a regal piece of infrastructure, that theoretically has a source of water from somewhere in the palace, that could theoretically keep a couple dozen trees supplied with-

Koishi was about to say, 'everything they needed', but, did trees need more than, just, water, sunlight, and air?

Probably fertilizer and dirt, too. In Gensoukyou they also needed, like, protective mesh or pesticides for part of the year, but one cool thing about living in Former Hell was that the insects had mostly died off, and the ones that survived were like a meter long so it was easy to see when they were attacking your crops.

Koishi spent a while more carefully inspecting the room that potentially could be a rectangular orchard around a water feature. The middle pool didn't look cracked, and there was one plum tree that seemed to still be alive. It's fruit wasn't tasty enough for Koishi to want to finish eating it, but it didn't look bad, not really. Like there were rooms that were more broken.

Which meant there was a bit of tidying up Koishi could do to distract herself, today.

Just, rolling some broken pillars out of the way, and cleaning up the rubble into a pile and pulling
out some of the obviously dead parts of tree.

She could get a sample of the dirt, maybe? That sounded like something that you'd do if you wanted to grow plants.

And, aqueducts needed to be, water proof, right? Like, she could fix all the cracks in the aqueducts before she tried to send water through them. That seemed like something she should ask someone about.

"What are you doing?" said a woman, suddenly, at one point. And, like, whatever, it was about time she stumbled upon Koishi anyway.

Koishi flexed her fingers around the piece of rubble she was carrying. "Stuff." Koishi said.

Satori was silent. Koishi didn't even look at her.

"What kind of stuff?" Satori said, eventually.

Koishi tossed the rubble into the rubble pile.

"I'm just tidying this room up a bit," Koishi said. "Why, is that not allowed?"

Satori frowned. "You should have asked me, first."

Koishi sighed, theatrically. She turned to her sister. "Fine, can I please, oh great master of the Earthen Palace, clean up this room?"

Satori frowned in a different way. "Contingent that you also clean up your attitude."

Koishi sighed loud enough that Satori would hear her. "Whatever. Fine. Don't you have other things to do?"

Satori closed all of her eyes and shook her head and tsk'd with her mouth. "Be that way, then."

And it only took a minute for Koishi to stop letting that affect her, so, hey, improvement.
And when Koishi figured she'd done enough productive things, she figured she'd go wandering again, except this time, idly seeking food.

Like, if she decided she was pressingly hungry, she could go to the kitchen and pull some dried meat or some grains out to prepare.

But she was just hungry enough that she could use it as a distraction. Like, she wasn't doing nothing, she was looking for something to eat. Just, on the scenic route, because she knew that food was in the kitchen- a repurposed foyer, at the front of the first floor of the building- but maybe there was a silo or something, too? At one point they turned a side chamber into a pantry and there were dry goods there, but otherwise, food was, like, a random drop from the crates around the palace.

At some point, Koishi decided to follow the aqueduct to see where all their water actually came from, and it turned out that the palace had this big sandstone cistern at the back of the building.

And Koishi couldn't figure out where that water originally came from, because the obvious thing to do would be to ask her sister, and there was no way she was going to do that. Maybe Rin could tell her once she got home?
And then it was evening. Rin and Okuu got back from their respective workplaces and Satori was waiting in the kitchen/dining room, which was a re-purposed foyer so actually it made sense that it was the first room you'd enter when you got to the palace, and that you could intercept anyone who entered the palace by just waiting there.

And since Koishi wanted to try to talk to her two oldest friends, she had to also be in that room, even though Satori was there.

"Hello there, you two," Satori soothed as her mates (maybe there was a better word for that?) walked in the main archway.

Both Rin and Okuu came to hug her, and Satori rubbed both of her lover's heads, and they started talking about their days, and like, Koishi could just interrupt them, but that'd be rude to Rin and Okuu.

So Koishi opted for quietly slinking up to the table, from behind Satori, and then, just, coughing.

Satori flinched, and Koishi idly took some sense of schadenfreude from that.

"Oh! Yeah, it's Thursday," Okuu said.
Satori turned her head. "That is correct! You're so smart, Utsuho!"

Okuu beamed, her eyes closed and her smile wide. "Ehee~"

"Oh-, we were going to go bar diving tonight," Rin said.

Satori tutted. "Oh, trying to escape three days in a row, are you?"

Koishi grinned maliciously. "Any wonder they'd want to do that?"

Satori's smirk faded. "I, suppose I will have to elicit your remuneration later. Let me get my coat."

Koishi paused everything she was doing. "You're going too?" She said.

Satori had the audacity to smirk at her, just then. "Oh, is that not allowed?"

Koishi reflexively bit down on the left side of her mouth. "You wanna play that game?" She began, "You are always such a-

"You knowww," Rin interjected. She pontificated, physically in between Koishi and her sister, "I'm sure we can all have a good time, together...."

"I mean," She turned to Satori. "It's not particularly your scene, but i'm sure there's things you'll enjoy-"

Okuu nodded. "And Koishi was hoping to talk to Mayor Yuugi about- stuff!"

Koishi scrunched her mouth to the side. Well, it'd have come up sooner or later, so, why not get it out of the way now. "Yeah," she said, and Koishi thought she was inclined to elaborate further, but that turned out not to be the case.

"Oh?" Satori said, "What kind of stuff?"

"Just, stuff," Koishi said. Then she went outside, to the front of the palace, to wait for the rest of the party to prepare.

Koishi noted that Okuu and Rin were trying to keep a conversation going with her and her sister, respectively, so that Satori never had the opportunity to talk at her.

And hey, that worked out. Koishi wasn't going to pick a fight unless Satori started it.
So Koishi followed her two friends and her sister as they went, on a Thursday, to a bar.

Idly, Koishi wondered who kept track of the days.

Could she be sure that what the Oni said was 'Thursday' was actually for real a Thursday?

Like, all the isolated little settlements in Gensoukyou, What if one of them got it one day off?

And then years later, it was another day off? And then over and over until someone was celebrating Christmas in July or something?

And even if it didn't get that bad, surely a few discrepancies would be inevitable, right?

And, who kept the time? Like, if there was a discrepancy because, obviously, not everyone was in contact with each other all the time, what happens if ? Or if some parts of Gensoukyou decided to go crazy and like, set the clocks back an hour, was there any authority to correct that?

"That's something you can ask Yuugi!" Okuu said, and Koishi realized she'd been thinking aloud.

Rin nodded. "That was one reason for the radio initiative; to get everyone in the city on the same schedule. Since the scyscrapers block the view of the horizon, we can't do what the Scarlet Devil town does and have a big clocktower that anyone can just look at."

"The buildings also partially block sound," Okuu said, "and also waste mutants would be attracted to the tick-toking, so a radio system would prevent that."

"Huh," Koishi said.

Somewhere in the center of the city, as the hell sun set upon the distant barren horizon between ruined skyscrapers, they followed makeshift electrical lighting to one particular neon sign pointing to the entrance to the basement of a building that Koishi figured probably looked stable enough.

And they opened a door with a creak and a thunk, into a bar where the walls were parts of automobile and reclaimed buildings.

A particularly well-kempt Oni was up on a raised platform at the far wall, playing an over-sized lute and singing something in a language that Koishi knew was actually Japanese, but sounded more like grunting and drunken mewling.

Rin went up to get them three tankards of grog and one cup of tea, as they waited for Yuugi to finish her set and give the floor over to what turned out to be avant-garde spoken word poetry, but just for today.
"Alright, she usually sits in the VIP booth in the corner over there," Rin said, after the band left the stage in favor of, some of the more philosophical denizens of the town doing spoken word poetry on stage where the band had just been playing. (Most of them were Oni, though, so there were a lot of metaphors around meat and booze.) "She'll have some secretaries with her to, do, elected official stuff, but she's always open to talking to people."

Koishi make a grin. "Ah, can, you, maybe," she said, "come with me?"

"Oh! I guess we can," Rin said. She tilted her head to the side. "But haven't you met- oh, shit-" Rin cut herself off.

"I don't know, just like, can you introduce me," Koishi took a breath, "I vaguely know what she's about, but like, you guys actually know Yuugi, don't you?"

"We all know Yuugi," Satori stated, insufferably.

"She helped the corpse acquisition industry get incorporated," Rin said.

"And she always tells me how happy she is that I'm making the power plant go!" Okuu said.

"I guess I'll introduce you," Satori said.

"I would rather you didn't," Koishi stated.

"And why do you have to be like that-"

"Because you always try to find ways to insult me," Koishi stated. "And you're just sitting there pretending to be helpful whe-"

"He--eey, how about," Rin said. She pulled on Satori's hand. "You come dance with me on the dance floor-"

"And dance to avant-garde spoken word poetry?" Satori said, incredulously.

"Yeah, we'll make it a thing," Rin said. She managed to pull Satori out of the booth.

Okuu stood up and saluted in an exaggerated manner. "And I can introduce you to Yuugi, then!"

Koishi shrugged. She followed Okuu.

"The secret to talking to any Oni is," Okuu explained, on the way, "is that if you suddenly say something awkward, you just need to laugh really hard, since Oni will also laugh really hard, because they don't want to be left out of something fun."

Koishi nodded. "Makes sense."

They approached Yuugi's booth.
See like, it was actually kind of daunting to just go up to someone, and Koishi usually got around that with the knowledge that no social interaction she did mattered in the long term so her mistakes would get erased any time she wanted, and sometimes when she didn't want to. This turned into her, just, resigning herself to horribly awkward, creepy, and unproductive conversations, and that meant that Koishi ended up having a lot less experience in making good first impressions.

Okuu didn't seem to have that problem, though.

"Hey there, Yuugi!" Okuu said, as the two of them got to the edge of the table. Okuu raised her hand up. "Do you remember the prospective volunteer I mentioned yesterday?"

Koishi winced.

"Ah'm afraid ah dinnae," Yuugi said. And that made sense; even if you only talked about her in the vaguest terms, Koishi would fade from memory, definitely after falling asleep.

"But tha's my mistake," Yuugi said. She held out a giant hand that looked like it could crush a human's head by just flexing too hard.

"But aye, now tha ah 'ave, 's nice ta meet ya. What be yer moniker, lassie?"

Koishi blinked with her remaining eyes. "I, um." She glanced at Okuu. That was another reason why she wanted someone to be here with her, in case she needed some discreet clarification on, what exactly Yuugi was saying.

Okuu smiled with her whole face. "This is Koishi! She's cool."

Koishi smiled and tipped her hat. "Charmed, truly." She shook the mayor's hand, since her hand could also crush a human's head just by flexing too hard; it just didn't look like it could.

"So, are ye new? Ah kannae help but notice that you're of the same species as our resident feudal lord."

"Ah," Koishi said, again.

"Yeah, she's also a satori-" Okuu said, "But she's not named that, because that name's already taken."

Koishi made a smirk. "Yeah, seriously, how weird is it to be named your species name?"

Yuugi laughed. "Ah'm nae one ta say anyone's circumstances are weird. Did ya knae there's an ancient Greek goddess cuttin' aboot somwhere in Gensoukyou proper?"

"Oh, really?" Koishi said, because she figured that was a relevant thing to say no matter what.

"Ye, escaped tha Diecide. 'aven't met her, though, so maybe tha's nae true."

"There's definitely a vampire, though," Okuu mentioned, "And not even a Chinese one. Like, one all the way from Europe."

"Yeah...." Koishi said. She changed the subject, "Oh, and, to answer your question, I, am new, in a ways," Koishi pontificated, "Re'-newed, continuously."

There was a second and a half of awkward silence, and then Koishi made herself chuckle uproariously. Okuu helped add to the effect, and then Yuugi and her secretary Oni joined in.
After Yuugi finished laughing, she wiped her face on her sleeve. "Aye, so dae ye need a tour about? I guess yer burd could show ye around, but ifn ye wannae officious tour, ah'll contact customs."

Koishi glanced at Okuu.

"Nah, we can cover showing her around- thanks though!" Okuu said.

Oh, 'show ye around', yeah, that made sense. "I've been here before. I remember going to a night club last time I was in town," Koishi said. And, dang, it had actually been a fat minute since she'd last thought of Flandre like, in that kind of personal, visceral way. "But then again, I didn't even know Okuu's workplace existed, so what do I know?"

"Actually, yeah, we got the old nukuler plant up a decade ago," Yuugi said. That one actually sounded normal. "Really? That long?" Koishi said, "Dang, I feel bad. I never bothered to visit Okuu there."

"Aye. Ta be honest, it mostly was tae get people used tae Utsuho, here, since they all distrust nukuler things on account o tha apocalypse an all. Having a cracking fun burd as tha face of our nukuler program, goes a long way." Yuugi said. She looked at the wall. "cept we haff nothing tae use the electricity on. Now it be all bright lights, neon signs, heaters, and we're lookin at tryna ta use electrickery fer food in saem way."

"Oh, okay," Koishi said, hopefully convincingly.

"But aye, ye say ye want ta help out? We've nae dearth of short-term contract work to accomplish." Yuugi said.

Okuu leaned down to Koishi's ear. "That's what we've rebranded 'side quests' as, because adventurers thought 'side quest' was demeaning and exploitative, and made people question why they were actually doing them."

Koishi nodded. "Ah."

Yuugi pontificated theatrically. "Necromancers keep setting up shop around, since ye can raise nigh unlimited skellingtons from tha dead of pre-civilizations from up under tha nuclear ash, and corpses dinnae decompose without bacterial decomosition, so ye can just raise natural mummies pretty easily."

"There's ah board for item requests- I ken Hachiko's been tryain' to get ingredients tae cook something called 'gingersnaps' for a few years, after trying some at ah pah'ee at Gensoukyou proper."

"Occasionally we need specific salvage, but anything you gather from a salvage run will get put in storage fer later use. We're good aen snack cakes an copper atta moment."

"And thar be a bounty oan any scraps of precursur knowledge ye find. We're tyring tae crack r'frigeration the long way but if we find an instruction manual, that'd be expedient."

"Oh! An' food. Ifn ya want tae help farm, we dinnae say nae ta that. Our snack cake stockpile should hold out fer a while, and corpse intake is still goang strong, but we're gonna haff ta start thinking of a long-term agricultural solution to our food supply, hopefully sooner than later."

Koishi idly toyed with the brim of her hat. "Well, that's interesting, since I'm actually kind of
interested in, setting up an orchard in the Palace of Earth Spirits." Koishi said.

Yuugi’s eyes sparkled a bit. "Ohh, yer interested in humanities first skill huh?"

Koishi shrugged. "I guess I’m into killing, but I was more thinking farming."

Yuugi laughed uproariously. "Aye fak, can't argue wit that, kannae?" She slapped her thigh. Koishi grinned.

The mayor gestured at her secretary, who pulled out some manilla folders, one of which Yuugi plucked out and started leafing through.

"How much dae ya know about farming?" Yuugi asked.

"Just assume I know nothing," Koishi said.

"Well, plants need sunlight, soil, water, and air ta grow." Yuugi tapped her nose. "And trees particularly are mostly made o carbon, and they get that, not from tha water or soil, but from tha air. So it'd be technially correct tae say that trees come from thin aer."

"Haha," Koishi said, unconvincingly.

"Sunlight's nae a problem, even though more of it's red than it used to be. The air's fine. I know the Palace of Earth Spirits has access tae a clean aquifer, so you don't even need a purification plant set up."

"Ah big problem with most of our soil is a lack of organic materials. The soil composition in other ways- elements, growing bed sizes, is all pretty good otherwise, it's just that all tha living matter died a while back, and there's nae bacteria to decompose any organic matter in there. So ye'll need bacteria, then biomass for it to feed on, and then plants will use the bacterial byproducts as nutrition to encourage growth, especially if yer intending to grow crops fer food."

"Well, can't I get, fertilizer?" Koishi said, "Like, that's something farmers can get, right?"

"I's funny ye mention that, since one of tha impending problems wid our little society here, is all tha poop that gets generated."

Koishi snorted but halfway through thought maybe she shouldn't do that so she needed up just half-choking on her own throat muscles. "R- really?"

"Aye. Ah mean, sure, there's ground peat moss an wood chips that ye can git, but 'istorically fertilizer came from poop." Yuugi said, ""Animal poop is only partially digested, and can be used for fertilizer pretty well, but we dinnae have that much herbivorsous livestock readily available."

Okuu nodded. "But we do have a large population of Oni and other assorted humanoids," she added.

"Tha problem be, tha' an Oni generates five kilograms of poop per week- humans and smaller Youkai generate a little less," Yuugi continued, "But our population mostly eats people and snack cakes, which both be filled wid toxins that'll end up innae waste. Not ta mention, any oni-specific diseases can survive innae poop tae, and might infect the crops. So, its generally not a good idea to fertilize Oni food crops wid fertilizer from thar poop."

Koishi managed to keep a straight face. "Oh, okay."
"But wid water being scarce enough, we cannae devote any extra tae a sewer system," Yuugi pontificated, "so it be just, piling up innae one o' tha underground areas."

"You don't have access to water?" Koishi said, "But the river Styx is, like, within walking distance?"

"Aye, but it be contaminated."

"With radiation?" Koishi said.

"Well, a liddle, but mostly wid human souls. They're hard tae filter oot."

"Makes sense." Koishi said. "Ah, speaking of water, uh, I think we'd need, to fix up the Palace's water system?"

Yuugi smiled. "Ay, ahm aware o' yer sitiation. We'll send a mason in."

"Yeah, is that, going to need filtering?" Koishi said.

"So you've got a natural cistern and filtration system already, there," Yuugi said, "See, tha palace of earth spirits was built around a giant plateau of sandstone wid a natural lake atta top. It slowly- an ah mean slowly- filters the water through the rock, tae produce a constant drip of water atta base."

Okuu nodded. "Its actually why the palace was made there in the first place- there was a cave at the bottom that continuously wept clean, potable water, no matter how dry the day was, because it was actually leaking water from thousands of years ago. It's since been turned into a water supply."

"Oh, well, can't you guys copy that, then, for water filtration?" Koishi said.

"Tha prolem wid that be, wie cannae wait thousand's o years." Yuugi laughed. Then she looked into the distance. "Allough, mebee we can dae something less effective but faster wid jus sand..."

Yuugi snapped her fingers at her secretary, who pulled a piece of paper out of her big leather bag, that Yuugi quickly sketched and scribbled out some schematics on. When the secretary oni put it back into the bag, Koishi glimpsed a whole stack of things like it.

"And inna meantime, ah'l get the oni in the bar to spit into a cup fer ya. Mix it in at tha soil in yer orhard, and It'll help start building up organic matter."

"Oh, is that, important?"

"Aye, an bacteria 'll stay dormant fer years, so ye might as well geddit done sooner than later."

"And, the bacteria comes from oni mouths?" Koishi said.

"Aye," Yuugi stated. "Innae wake o' total ambient bacteria death, many Oni 'ave heroically volunteered their mouths tae be beds tae cultivate new, radiation-resistant bacteria, in order tae restart the environmental processes essential tae a healthy ecaesystem."

"Really?" Koishi said. She scrunched her mouth, impressed.

"Well, that's how we're re-framing the abject failure o' our oral hygiene initiative last decade," Yuugi said.

Koishi stifled a laugh. "I... see."
In the corner of one of her remaining eyes, Koishi noticed that her sister had started to drag Rin over, to creep on their conversation. Welp, that was her cue to leave, then.

"Well, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Yuugi," Koishi said, as she stood up. She tipped her hat.

"Cor! Dinnae be a stranger, Miss Koishi!" Yuugi said, and Koishi suppressed a wince.

She held out her massive hand again, and Koishi shook it, with only the hint of the latent pangs of the despair that came with knowing that she'd probably end up doing this again soon.

"Oh, one last thing," Koishi said.

Yuugi raised an eyebrow. "Aye?"

"Can I sign up for one of those hip radios?" Koishi said.

Satori and Rin groaned. Koishi smirked.

Chapter End Notes

I took a step back, and realized I was writing a Japanese demon with a Scottish accent talking about soil reclamation after a nuclear apocalypse.

Soo, Yuugi, is, really non-canon in this fic. And the reason why is a bunch of random personal free-association chains, so feel free to skip the rest of this author's note.

On a macro level, its probably because Scotland never got absorbed into the roman empire. Thus Scottish people were considered barbarians or at least a less cultured part of the island for almost all of England's history, and when Britain established colonies around most of the world, that cultural idea spread with it.

And oni are commonly seen as barbarians, so I figured they occupied similar thematic spaces.

The specific reason is that early in my internet phase, I discovered a webcomic called *Chimneyspeaks* by Jack Cayless, a steampunk-ish historical-ish story about a hit man working for a brothel in New England. (It's, literally murder porn in some places, a heads up.)

But there was a scene in it, where the ultimate murder-jack was sitting on a pile of dead redcoats, and she said something like

'They'll all be remembered as heros. The ones who ran. The ones who fired blindly into the smoke. Is this really the best England had to send at me?'

And from off frame was a speech bubble: "Aye lassie, tha best England had ta send at ye"

And then a pile of Highlanders stepped into frame to start the big fight scene.

And my developing mind just thought that was sooo cool, so I ended up incorporating
that into a couple tabletop RPG's and other personal head-canonz I just ended up associating all noble-warrior archetypes with Scottish highlanders, and then, I got vaguely into the superficial idea of Touhou, and the Touhou version of Oni, and the rest of it is this fic.
The next day, Koishi was sure to wake up early enough to say bye to Okuu and Rin, before she got to work trying to do work.

The grossest part of gardening (And the part that made Koishi maybe consider reconsidering the whole endeavor) was taking that jar of Oni spit and mixing it into the dirt in the paradieza.

An hour after the Oni first spit in it and Yuugi poured a sugar packet into it to jump start the bacterial reproduction, it had congealed slightly, and started developing little black tendril-like things that spiked around in fuzzy clumps. Koishi resolved to never kiss an Oni on the mouth.

The next day, after the spit had dried in the dirt, Koishi didn't notice much of a difference, but like, gardening took work, right? It wouldn't happen overnight, but one day this place would be this beautiful oasis and she'd realize it was just the result of a bunch of little steps. Probably.

And also during that day, there was a visitor, at the front of the palace.
Koishi rushed to the archway that denoted the front door, to find two confused looking Oni carrying wheelbarrows of Peat moss.

"Ah- um," Koishi said, looking at the Oni, and then the moss.

"Ayy. We'r here tae drop off a delibery. Naeone remembers placin tha order, but that happenes maest maern'ns after we drink tae much."

"Ah- um, yes-" Koishi tipped her hat. "I'm Koishi. Charmed, truly."  

"That's nice, but dae ya ken who needs tha order?"

"Oh! Ah, yeah, that's, me-" Koishi stumbled.

"Aight, cor. Where ye wanty this, then?"

"Let- let me, show you-"

Koishi comforted herself with the fact that they wouldn't remember Koishi flubbing her introduction, and that in all likelyhood Koishi would have the opportunity to try again with the exact same people the next time she needed something from Former Hell's agriculture department.

And after mixing the peat moss together, the shovel Koishi had been using broke. It made sense, since it was, probably, super old- Koishi had to dig it out of deep storage on one of the lower levels, and nobody in the household did anything that might need a shovel- but it was also kind of annoying. Like, didn't Satori manage to stock up on any useful household supplies in their like, seven decades of living in Gensoukyou?

So that afternoon, Koishi whined at Rin to take her into the part of the market where gardening tools lived. Rin acquiesced on the first try.

A lesser youkai could get lost in the market, since every stall was made from the same, like, reclaimed metal parts and tarps and makeshift wood, but since they were all made ad hoc, each one had a unique shape, if not style, that a dedicated inhabitant could get familiar enough with to navigate the city.

And, maybe it was time Koishi got familiar with them. Like, she'd probably be in Gensoukyou until the heat death of the universe, and all her friends lived here, so it was likely Koishi'd spend time in the area.

But with her most recent social failure fresh in her mind, Koishi decided against trying to introduce herself to the clerk, this time, but next time, for sure.

There wasn't much else to do with soil preparation but wait for the bacteria to decompose the fertilizer, so Koishi decided to walk into town to find something to do.

She wandered along the less extreme cracks in the broken asphalt motorways until she ended up in a collection of junk teepees and neon signs that Koishi suspected qualified as the central hub of the
reborn city. Confirming her suspicions was a bulletin board, with news and welcome flyers and other junk, but also full of side quest-erm, short-term contract work solicitations.

The contract work included some food deliveries, scavenge requests, and a list of known threats out in the wilds that weren't pressing enough for Yuugi to form a posse against (since that'd mean taking away a fair amount of oni from their professional posts to potentially get ambushed while out of their home field) but would probably be worth it to get nipped in the bud before they were pressing enough for Yuugi to pull Oni away from their professional posts to, potentially get ambushed while out of their home field.

So Koishi sighed up to murder a necromancer out in the wastes. It turned out, skeletons didn't have sub consciousness that Koishi could erase herself from, so she had to kill all the skeletons the hard way. It was actually rather refreshing, having to try for a change. All in all, it was a good way to burn an afternoon, and Koishi didn't even mind that it turned out Oni operated on a gift economy, which meant the side quest didn't even give any loot.

A few days later, after tending the soil of the pairidaeza and sorting through the Earth Palace's storage rooms for usable supplies, there was another knock at the Palace's front archway.

Koishi rushed to the archway that denoted the front door, to find a human -wearing a face mask, of course, because of the radiation, and most humans and Youkai with less robust healing factors weren't able to continually cast or afford to hire someone to continually cast a spell to not require oxygen as long as they stayed in Former Hell.

Since most Oni weren't particularly drawn to some of the skills a civilization needed to rebuild, Yuugi had various immigration incentives for residents of Gensoukyou to move to Former Hell, and Koishi guessed some humans were dumb enough to fall for it.

"Ah- um," Koishi said, looking at the human in the full-face rubber face mask. "What's, up?" she said, lamely.

"Hello," came a voice through the mask, "Yuugi told me that the palace needed a mason, though we had no records of who made the request, or for what."

"Oh! Yes, that's, right." Koishi said.

The human didn't say anything, and Koishi realized she didn't actually convey any information in her sentence.

Koishi coughed.

"I was the one who requested such a service," Koishi said. She held out her hand-

The human looked at her own hands, which were full carrying two buckets of equipment and materials, and thus unavailable to return a handshake.

Koishi retracted her hand, and then she spun around so that the human couldn't see her cheeks tint turquoise. "Let- let me show you what we needed you to repair. And, uh, can you show me how to fix the things myself, while you're at it?"
"Sure, I've got enough of a backlog already, so teaching you might lighten my workload," said the human.

And Koishi realized she didn't introduce herself, or ask for the humans name either.

Over the next few weeks, in the down time from gardening, Koishi tried out filling some item requests-

Which were actually pretty easy, since she could just, walk into the makeshift shacks and lean-to's to look for certain items, take them, and avoid all consequences by ducking around a corner.

But the following day, even more item requests went up on the board, from all the people Koishi took things from.

So, that probably wasn't sustainable long term. Dang, Koishi never thought she'd lose faith in the unlimited potential of petty theft, but here she was…

...spending the following day on a trip all the way into Gensoukyou to steal from other civilizations, to give to a group she suddenly cared for more than any other random group, and thus using the unlimited potential of petty theft to help them out.

Koishi delivered the items by hand, since short one-off interactions where she was in a position of power over the other person were her specialty. Usually it just involved smiling sagely and tipping her hat, and it never involved asking the other person's name first.

One day, Okuu idly complimented Koishi's willingness to stick her bare hands into dirt, onto rocks, and against tools.

"Wait," Koishi said, as she examined her hands, covered in dirt that was slightly sticky since the bacteria started working, rapidly healing cuts from the sharper rocks and errant uncareful tool use. "What do gardeners normally do?"

"Well, they wear gloves," Okuu said, "and, other protective gear. Like, there's even a leather store in town that sells work gloves, to keep your hands from getting roughed up-"

So that afternoon, Koishi whined at Rin to take her into the part of the market where leather clothing lived. Rin acquiesced on the first try.

So they wandered along the less extreme cracks in the broken asphalt motorways into town to buy some gardening gloves (she wanted corpse-leather, but it turned out that was usually a fashion leather, and post-apocalyptic megafauna leather was both cheaper and more durable than the fashionable corpse leather Koishi originally wanted. And it wasn't as if people would, like, remember how fashionable she was during gardening anyway.)
A lesser youkai could get lost in the market, since every stall was made from the same, like, reclaimed metal parts and tarps and makeshift wood, but since they were all made ad hoc, each one had a unique shape, if not style, that a dedicated inhabitant could get familiar enough with to navigate the city. Koishi recognized the neon sign that pointed to the central square, and also one restored structure that was also visible from the tool market.

And Koishi picked out some nice dark green gardening gloves ones in her size as well as a smock, and called it a day.

Koishi thought she understood both Okuu and Rin's jobs, now.

Like, Rin would probably die of boredom if she had to sit in one place boiling water for seven hours a day, and Okuu would be scared and confused if she were tasked with robbing three separate funerals a week, but Koishi could probably handle either of them. So, it was, just, up to her to find something for herself to do, somewhere in between those two extremes, so she didn't, just, run around all day with nothing to do, like her sister.

It turned out, gardening was pretty therapeutic. You had some tasks to do each day and there weren't any short cuts or excuses - you just had to do them. She could set her radio to Yuugi's Radio Activity channel and work to music, and if she needed a break she could follow along with the Toe Touching activity or the Words and Spellings activity or the Declaring Allegiance to the State activity.

And the times Koishi did want something that required problem solving, well, those skeletons weren't going to kill themselves.

A few weeks in, the pairidaeza was ready so that, like, the soil could hold a little moisture. It even changed color to look a little more like the soil in Gensoukyou proper.

And there was enough organic material in the soil that transplanting a couple saplings wouldn't, just, slowly kill them via some kind of nutrient deprivation.

The aqueduct wasn't fully ready for automatic watering, but that just meant Koishi needed to manually stock a half dozen amphora of water in the corner of the clearing to water the trees until she finished repairing the water system, and she'd have to manually collect the runoff.

"Well, the trees will need some time to grow, too," Rin said, "So, do you want to get a start on them now?"

"Oh! Sure, yeah." Koishi said. She wiggled her fingers maniacally. "Tiiiiime for another heist," she said, ominously, mischievously.
"I mean, we can just buy some," Rin said. "From someone in Gensoukyou."

"Really?" Koishi said.

"Yeah," Rin said, "Yuugi's friends with an oni who's dating a celestial from up on Youkai Mountain. We can get some bonafied pure grade fancy pantsy fruit trees."

"Can we get, liiiike," Koishi said, "An Immortality Peach tree?"

"Probably not," Rin said. "But some regular peach trees should be pretty doable."

And a few days later, an exceptionally large Oni (like, building-sized large) showed up at the front of the palace, with an armful of trees all with their root systems all bundled in those biodegradable sacks.

Koishi managed to overcome her surprise at seeing a literal giant. Or, maybe this was, like, some kind of Norse Jotun that had managed to get entrance to Gensoukyou?

"Hello," Koishi said, and she smiled and tipped her hat "Welcome to the palace of Earth Spirits."

"Aye," bellowed the giant Oni, "ye had a request fer peaches, and, wossnames...?"

"Yeah, that was me," Koishi tipped her hat again, reflexively. "I'm Koishi. What's your name?"

"Suika," bellowed the Oni. She didn't say anything more.

"Can I help you carry one of those?" Koishi siad.

Suika looked into her arms. "Nah. Ah Jus' gottem inna comferble spot." She adjusted her arms a little.

"Okay, yeah. Uh," Koishi looked towards the palaces entrance archway, which was miraculously intact over the years of disrepair.

"I think you'll fit if you crawl?"

"Nah, dinnae worry, ah gots dis-"

And Suika shrunk, like, 20% - which made the trees a little more unwieldy in her arms.

"Well, now I should help you carry one of those,

"Yeah, ah guess."

And a few trips through the palace later, Koishi had 5 peach trees, 3 plumb trees, 2 fig trees, a cherry tree and a pear tree, ready to plant, in one corner of her garden.

Suika stuck a round a bit after, for tea in the part of the foyer where they had set out a dinner table next to a fallen pillar. It turned out, she was a regular Oni, and she was normally, just, incredibly petite, but she could change her size.

And Koishi realized, she had managed to have a successful conversation with a total stranger, that
didn't rely on her secretly gathering information before hand and using it to drive a conversation that one of them thought was a first time.

But then it turned out Suika was piss drunk that whole time, so, maybe Koishi had overestimated how sociable she had become.

Two days after the planting of her trees, Koishi got fed up with manually watering them so she spent 35 hours finishing the aqueduct repairs. Like, every time she thought she was done she found another section that was, just, filled with cracks. Bluh.

But eventually, Koishi couldn't find any more breakages when she ran along the edges, a quick trip back to the source of the flow to formally turn it on.

And after another quick run to the pool at the center of the garden ensured that there were no additional and/or undiscovered leaks, Koishi threw her arms in the air and floated. "Yes!"

"Huh," Said a woman, from behind her. It was her sister.

"I guess you were serious about this," Satori said.

Koishi narrowed her remaining eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you've found something constructive to do with your time. For once." Satori said. She leaned against one of the entrance arches. "I'm proud of you."

And that was the second time Koishi briefly considered giving up on the whole thing, because, gross, what did Satori even think she knew-

"Do you need anything for it?" Satori said, "I can make some calls to Yuugi."

"I'm good," Koishi said. She didn't look up.

"Maybe you want to retile the pond mosaic?" Satori said. She looked around.

"You wanna just let me do this?" Koishi shot, reflexively-

And to her surprise, Satori didn't shoot back. "Yeah, okay. Just let me know if you need anything for it."
"Hey, this is looking pretty good!" Okuu said, one day-

And Koishi looked up from the garden-

-and she realized, she had gotten preoccupied with tending the plants and had missed greeting her friends when they returned from work.

"Huh, I guess you're right," Koishi said.

"We should celebrate!" Okuu said. "You want to get some drinks at the Last Tour tonight?"

Koishi remember the grog, and the swill, and the meat. Ahem, 'meat'. "Eeehhhhhhhh….

"Well, its another Thursday, so Yuugi'll be there, and, maybe," Okuu pontificated awkwardly, "she can 'meet' the gardener of the Earth Palace that we've been vaguely alluding to her about?"

And, with the benefit of Cheating, Koishi managed to have a pleasant-enough conversation with Mayor Yuugi where she introduced herself and made some jokes that she knew Yuugi would laugh at, and Yuugi lay all these compliments on Koishi that maybe koishi could feel she deserved. But like, it wasn't like the trees were even producing fruit yet.

And the next day, an agricultural care package came from the mayors office. It was another jar of spit. Koishi tilled it in immediately, making sure to use her gloves, but also being careful not to get too much spit on them.

And one day, after slaying some skeletons in the wastes, Koishi returnened to her paradisea-

- and it was occupied. It was her sister-

And like, a dozen people Koishi hadn't seen before-

"What, are you doing here," Koishi said, oestensibly to the crowd but really just to Satori.

"Oh, you did such a good job fixing this place up, i offered to host this month's meeting," Satori said.

"You just," Koishi tilted her head around, "thought you'd, just, give my garden away for the day, without asking.

"Its not giving it away, its still here," Satori said.

Koishi sighed. "You know what I mean, obviously, but if you want to be obtuse: The problem is that you just took over the thing I was clearly doing. For like, the last three months-
"Oh, you put work into something for the first time in your life and now you think you own it," Satori said, "There is a lot more to responsibility than just hard work for a month."

"Oh, and you think you get to say that, after you let the entire palace crumble since we got here?" Koisji said, "You don't know what responsibility is-

"Koishi. Sister," Satori said, in that godsdamned condescending tone of voice, as she closed her three eyes, "I'm responsible for you and that means-

"I don't need you to be responsible for me!" Koishi yelled. Her fists balled and she floated, slightly, in rage "You're such a condescending bag of shit! Just take care of yourself!"

"I'm not the one who poked out her eye!" Satori spat.

"That-" Koishi said, because she had to, because she couldn't let Satori win- but her voice cracked as she failed to think of a follow through- "That's not fair…

"It's completely fair, and that's why you're mad," Satori said, triumphantly, "one hundred percent of your problems come from you blinding your third eye and now there's exactly three people in Gensoukyou who can help you and I'm one of them."

"Not-" Koishi mumbled, as she fell back to the ground. "Not one hundred percent…"

"My palace is always open to you because, frankly, you need someplace to hide out after you muck everything up-"

"Satori," said what looked like the leader of the group, a humanoid youkai (probably?) with long hair that started dusk-purple but ended up dawn-yellow, who's head ornament was a bamboo sugegasa. "Clearly your- sister? Is upset."

"She gets like that, Byakuren," Satori said, dismissively. Koishi clenched her jaw.

Byakuren, which was apparently the humanoid's name, seemed "And I don't think you are helping matters, especially when you devalue the effort she apparently put into this space."

Satori blinked, and she looked at By, and then at the wall, "Ah, you, think so?"

Koishi smirked.

"And is that correct," Byakuren said, "That you neglected to even inform your sister you would be using her garden?"

Satori frowned "Well its my palace-"

"it's my garden!" Koishi yelled.

"Satori, please," Byakuren said, silencing the satori before she managed to say anything.

Koisji smirked again.

Byakuren bowed to Koishi. It, well, it was kind of gratifying. Sure. "On behalf of Gensoukyo's Buddhist community, I apologize for the intrusion upon your space. I humbly request your permission to gather here for the next three hours, but of course we can vacate if necessary.

Koishi scrunched her mouth and looked at the wall. "I mean, sure, its nice to see people use it, but its, like, also nice if you ask first?"
Satori opened her mouth but Byakuren, without looking, moved her hand back towards Satori's mouth.

"It is, isn't it?" Byyakuren said, "And would you say it would be nice to see, literally, other people enjoy the garden you worked so hard to prepare?"

Koishi scruched her mouth to the side. "Sure?" She said. She shrugged.

"Then I invite you to join us, " the priest said. She held out a hand. "And, perhaps, you and your sister would benefit from a talk with me?"

Chapter End Notes

So, i know in canon nothing really suggests anyone's religious, but for like two years i didnt know that Satori were actually a mythological creature, I just saw the first google result where it was "A japanese Buddhist term for spirutual awakening", so I decided Satori would be Buddhist and Koishi would be rebelliously dismissive of it. I think that came up in an earlier chapter, but if not, here you go.

I also know that, in canon, Byakuren should still be sealed away, but I wanted more characters to blatently make non-canonical characterizations about.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!